

An Interview with August Wilson

Yvonne Shafer*

August Wilson was born in 1945 in Pittsburgh. He began his career as a poet and after many years turned to playwriting. He has said that he is writing "about the stuff that beats in my head." Growing up in a poor section of Pittsburgh, hanging around in bars and pool halls after dropping out of high school because he felt rejected as a black--Wilson's youth was the archetypal black American experience. From the streets he learned a rich, vibrant argot which he has transmuted into powerful, striking dialogue. He plans to write twenty or thirty plays about the black experience in America, decade by decade, and feels he will have no shortage of material: "I've got the four hundred year biography of the black experience in America."

August Wilson has won Bush, McKight, Rockefeller, and Guggenheim Foundation Fellowships in playwriting. He was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for *Fences*, which also won four "Tony" Awards, and the Drama Critics Circle Award for Best Play. In 1988, Wilson's *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* were both running on Broadway. The many awards he has won for his plays indicate the high esteem in which they are held by the critics. He has touched a responsive chord in both blacks and whites in New York and in many regional theatres. His plays have been described as, "haunting, profound, and indescribably moving."

Yvonne Shafer has published numerous essays, studies, and reviews in a number of major theatre journals. She, along with Marvin Carlson, is the co-author of a new theatre appreciation text, *The Dramatic Mirror*, forthcoming from Longman. The author wishes to thank the Yale Repertory Theatre for the photographs.

Q: Could you talk about being a poet and a playwright and how the two interact?

A: Well, I think my background in poetry has been very helpful to me as a playwright, and it's not just the attention to the language, but poetry affords you a certain way of thinking. I think the idea of metaphor comes into the plays because of the fact that I am a poet--thinking, as a poet, very differently. It's been very helpful to me.

Q: That sense of compression comes naturally to you because you worked first as a poet.

A: Yes, writing a poem you have a very small space to work in, you work in so many lines . . . you compress a lot of ideas into small space, but this still expresses your thinking.

Having written poetry for many many years . . . after about twenty some years you finally get a handle on it, I guess. But, I learned that forced me to think in a certain kind of way to get these ideas down into a small space. Now in the play, you have a big space, but you can still think the same way.

Q: Another element in your background was writing for the anthropology museum in St. Paul. What sort of work was that?

A: Most importantly, I wrote some one person shows, one on Margaret Mead and one on William Harvey. Also at the museum there we had profiles of science and we had also what we called character cameos. The Mayan Weaving Woman was one and they had a Mayan hut set up there.

Q: That's great.

A: One of the actresses would put on this costume and become a Mayan Weaving Woman and she had to have a little spiel to explain how she was a holy weaver. One guy, Doc somebody, collected Indian artifacts, and so we wrote a little spiel for him in order to say who he was, but at the same time demonstrate the things that the museum had in its collection . . . to show how the Indians ground their corn and what-not. In working those out there was interest because you were doing different things. You were creating a character for a specific purpose, demonstrating the artifacts in the museum. Those were fun to write.

Q: That's really interesting. I'd like to you ask you a few more things about your background before we move onto some other more current things. I know that when you were a child that your mother wanted you to read all of the time . . . read something every day?

A: Well, my mother taught me how to read. She had six kids and taught us all how to read. I learned how to read when I was four. She kept books around the house; it was very important. She would read to us from the books. We had a time that we would all sit down and she would read a few pages and then she would let us go out and play.

Q: Oh, that is so nice. I wish I had had that as a child. I was amused to see that one of the things that you had read was Nancy Drew books that she had got some place.

A: Well, having three sisters there were a bunch of Nancy Drew books around the house and I really like those. I miss them actually. Jeez, I must have read twenty, twenty-two of them.

Q: I think I did too. I think they probably have some good moral effects.

A: That was great reading.

Q: And also when you were young you got interested in music? When did that occur? I know that you bought a Betsy Smith record.

A: In 1965, I was twenty years old.

Q: Oh, so it wasn't an early influence, but now it's a major part of your work, isn't it?

A: Yes.

Q: Do you have a big collection of records now?

A: Well, actually see, all those many years I could never afford to buy records and so I don't. Now, however, I can afford to buy records and . . . I mad a *big* mistake. I went to Tower Records onetime, and I said, OK I've got a little bit of money here and I am going to buy some records finally and I went to the blues collection where they had a lot of records that I had been wanting for years, and other records, so I bought about \$300 worth of records.

Q: That's great.

A: Well, see the problem is, it's no fun. I listen to one and then I get anxious and want to hear another one. Then put on a third one . . .

Q: Oh, no! Too many at once. . . . Could you talk a little about your sense of using music in plays?

A: Well, one, it's not even so much using music in plays (although I certainly do that), because looking at black culture you find that the music is everywhere. So, it's very important, but also more importantly, I think, is the relation to the blues. I discovered that contained in the blues is an entire response, an entire cultural response of an entire people to the world that they found themselves in. So the ideas and attitudes of the people, their ideas about social organization, their ideas about morality, etc., are all contained in the music, in the blues. So, the blues is sort of like a book, if you will, and it goes back. I researched this, and I found out a lot of things about black culture because it's all there. If you did not know anything about Africans, if all you had was this music, it would inform you of their grace, their passion, their logic and everything is all contained in the music. So that's a very, very important part. So I'm just simply uncovering all this stuff and making use of all that I find there.

Q: Well, that certainly is evident in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Of course, it's a major element there, but it is interesting how much it comes up in the other plays too. I wonder if you can talk a bit about story telling mode. How do you feel that your approach to putting the play together relates to that?

A: There's an oral tradition of black culture in which the verbal agility is very highly prized among blacks. One of the things in telling the story is that if it contains information that you want to pass along, then you have to make the story memorable. So that anybody hearing it will go tell someone else and they'll tell someone else, etc. That's one of the ways that the information stays alive. In the process of telling the story you are permitted embellishment. The only rule, I would guess, is that you cannot change the essential truth of the story, but you can certainly illustrate it, demonstrate it. You may use any kind of metaphor you care to use. You can embellish the story, anything, as long as you are not changing the truth of the story or the information that is being passed out. And not only are you allowed to do that, but you are encouraged to do that and depending on who you tell the story to, you tell it differently to different people.

Q: Do you tell stories yourself a good deal?

A: Oh sure.

Q: It must be fun to be around you. In the plays themselves you have often used the story telling as an interesting element in the play but also something that ultimately moves the plot along or reveals some important thing about the past.

A: Well, this is how stories function in the sense that they carry the information. And so, yeah, they can move the plot along, advance things, reveal certain kinds of things. I mean, for instance, there's a lawyer, in Pittsburgh, this guy, he's a hero; I've heard so many stories about him, non of them true. He's a good lawyer. But, you hear so many stories about this lawyer, and the reason why you hear all those stories is . . . well, for example, when I showed up in the community when I was twenty years old and the community moved to educate me right and also protect me. First thing, chances are you are going to need a lawyer. If you're black and you're young in America you are going to need a lawyer some time or another. So, this guy is the best lawyer in the world. You hear a zillion stories about him. In actuality, that's the community telling you stories that are designed to help you.

Q: I can see how that same kind of thing appears in your plays. And let's talk about how you write. I know that you just got back from someplace where you could just write and not be bothered, is that right?

A: Ah, yes.

Q: I know some writers don't really like to talk about the way that they write, but I'm hoping that you wouldn't mind just talking a little about the various steps you go through when you are putting a play together.

A: Oh, no I don't mind at all. In fact, I'd like to do that. Everyone does it differently I'm sure. As I find more and more about the process I think essentially I'm a collagist. That is, I take little scraps and pieces of things and out of them discover and build the world of a play. And in the process of writing a play, I have no idea what is going to happen; what is going on. I don't know the story; I don't know anything. I very often start with a minor dialogue and the more the characters talk, then I can discover things about them. I found out that they will tell me the stories and the whole thing will emerge out of them. So, I don't predetermine anything. I started *Two Trains Running* sitting in an Elm City Diner in New Haven and a line popped into my head. The line was:

When I left out of Memphis I said I was going to buy me a V8 Ford.
I was going to drive by Mr. Henry Ford's house and honk the horn.
If he come to the windo I was gonna wave. Then I was goin' out
and get me a thirty-odd-six and come on back to Memphis and drive
up to Mr. Stovall's house and honk the horn, only this time I wadn't
wavin'.

So, I said, who is this talking, you know, who is Stovall, why does he want to get a rifle and go back and see Stovall, what did he do to him? So, I'm in the

process . . . I'm trying to discover who this guy is. And did he ever get the Ford? The next time I, more or less, asked the character, "Hey man, did you get the Ford?" "It took me thirteen years to get the Ford," he said, "then I traded that in six years later on a Cadillac. Then there was no way in The Hell I was going back to Memphis then. Do you know what they'd do to me, see me driving a Cadillac down in Memphis?" Later on he said, "I gave her everything I had for nine years." No, no,

I gave everything I had when I met her, then I gave everything I could get a hold of for the next nine years. When she was leavin' she wouldn't even shake my hand. I ain't never left nobody in bad manners. I stand there and try to say, "may God bless you everywhere you go." She was leavin'; she wouldn't even shake my hand.

I discovered there was a woman character in the play . . . there was something very peculiar, after nine years she didn't want to say goodbye to him. So, I'm in a process of discovering who this guy is and then eventually I give him a name and I look up one day and discovered that we were in a restaurant, which is the setting of the play, and there was another guy sitting over there. He was talking and I gave him a name. A guy walked in the restaurant out of the clear blue; I don't know who he is. He walks in and says, "If that 791 had come out I would be in Atlanta right now." I said, who do you know down in Atlanta? He said, "I got a woman down there, got two or three." "Well what you doin' up here if you got a woman in Atlanta?" He said, "WELL, she thinks I'm a rich man. You know last time I seen her I had \$700 in my pocket. Spent three of it on her. She think I got that kind of money all the time. I ain't going down there unless I got some money." So, he starts talking about that and in the process of that he said, "Well how are you doing with so and so?" And he said, "Oh, I told her I was going to get a Mojo here. Go to Louisiana and get a Mojo, but I ain't gotta to go that far. I know where to go: 1839 Raleigh in the back, red door. I go to see Aunt Esther. And he began to talk about this woman, Aunt Esther. And I discover that Aunt Esther is 322 years old. "She looks like she's 500." So, just from that little bit of dialogue I began to build up the world of the play. There's a woman named Aunt Esther. I discover that the guy who met the woman in Atlanta, his name is Wolf. The main character, the first guy that I heard, he owns this restaurant. I changed his name to Memphis. He owns the restaurant. The other guy's name is Brownie. And I just let them talk and the more they talk the more they reveal . . . And I don't know anything. So, I piece it together, little snippets of dialogue which guide me and lead me along the way. Then I discover there's a woman, there's a waitress. She was in the back the first time I was there and a guy called her and she walks out. So, I'm sitting there writing, she walked out and he called her Reesa, I don't know why. And then she starts talking and then something told me in my mind to look at her legs.

I looked and she had these big scars on her legs. And then I discovered that she's taken a razor blade and has cut her legs. I don't know why she's done this. So the more they talk the more I find out about the people. I find out about it and I get another little piece and another little piece and then a pattern begins to develop and I begin to put them all together to make, I hope, a seamless story that is made up of the content of the lives of these people.

Q: That was very interesting. Could you talk about the way that you work on the plays when you go to Yale? In the process of rehearsal do you make many changes, for example? Do you talk to Lloyd Richards about directions you could take the play?

A: I make whatever changes that are necessary, so each one is different, I guess. But I do, I work on the plays. Lloyd and I developed a way of working over the years, which actually calls for very little dialogue. There's an intuitive kind of understanding I think, of the overall arc of my work and what I am trying to accomplish. As an example, I sent Lloyd a copy of *The Piano Lesson* after I did the first rewrite. And Lloyd called me up and he said he got the script, and he said, "I think there's one too many scenes in the second act and I said, "Oh, okay, I'll look at that. And so I went back and I read the play and I'm reading it with the idea in mind that Lloyd said that there's one too many scenes in the second act. So I read it and sure enough I see a scene that looks like it can come out and I take it out of the play. And then I happened to be talking to Lloyd about something else and I said, "Oh, by the way I took that scene out of the play." And he said, "Good." And that was the end of that. To this day I don't know if we were talking about the same scene or not. We never got specific about it. That's an indication of the way we work. We'll be in rehearsal and we're reading stuff and Lloyd will say, "Well, you know you could lose something in here." Meaning a particular speech that he's just read, and I say, "Okay, I'll look at it." Then I go and see if I can cut it, and if I can I'll come in and bring the cuts or else I won't. And he will say, "Did you find anything in there?" and I'll say, "No, I didn't." And that's the end of that. He might come back to that and say, "Look again," but generally he doesn't say, "Well, looking at this speech I think we ought to cut this line and this line." He doesn't work that way. He allows me to find it myself.

I think it's the same way he works with the actors. Rather than telling them specifically what to do, he will allow them to arrive at their conclusion, to do what he wants them to do, on their own. A little bit of guidance here and there. It's more important for actors and also the writer, to find it yourself. The thing is I see where I can lose this that and the other in this particular speech. And there have been some times I have decided I want to cut this and Lloyd has said, "You know, I don't think you want to cut that. You don't like that line? I like that line. Hey, you know?" And I said, "Okay, Lloyd we'll keep it."

Q: That sounds like a wonderful relationship. Are you planning anything soon, in New Haven?

A: Well, I have a new play that I'm working on. I've finished the first draft of it and now I am writing the second draft and I suspect we will do it up at Yale.

Q: And this is *Two Trains Running* which you have been talking about. When do you think you will finish it?

A: The play is finished. I'm doin a rewrite.

Q: How long does it take you to do a rewrite, let me ask you that?

A: Well, it takes about two months to write a play. It takes two years to finish it, to do the rewrite.

Q: Then when will it likely go into production at Yale?

A: If we work on it this summer, probably next season, either in the fall or the spring.

Q: And I have also read that you have been working on the screenplay for *Fences*.

A: Yes.

Q: Is that done?

A: The screenplay? It will be done in a few days.

Q: Are you tempted by TV and movie offers that I'm sure you must be getting?

A: No, I'm not. I don't want to write for film or TV.

Q: Good, I'm awfully glad to hear that. I'm sure I am speaking for many people when I say thank you and don't change your mind. Now you've been talking for awhile about your cycle. Could you say a bit more about that?

A: Well, I didn't start off with any grand idea of going about it in a certain way. The three plays are set in different decades and I just decided, well I know I can take them and do that. As a result I have a play in 1911, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 1927 *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. The 1930s *The*

Piano Lesson. The 1950s *Fences*. 1960s, *Two Trains Running*. I have a '70s play called *Jitney*. So, I have the '40s and the '80s to do.

Q: And then you'll start over?

A: And then I'll start over, sure. There's more than one story to tell. The '60s everyone said would be the hardest, and I always assumed it would be the hardest, probably because it's the one I know best, the years I came into manhood. So, I decided to tackle that one and get it out of the way, which I did, with *Two Trains*. Now, I only have the '40s and '80s and I will probably do the '40s next. That's very interesting.

Q: I certainly look forward to that. I think the cycle is a marvelous idea. What has come out of it so far is so wonderful, I can't wait to see the rest. I'd like to ask you something else. I'm sure you're often asked about your role as a black playwright as opposed to just being an American playwright?

A: Well, you know, sure, people ask me that . . . The people asking me this already assume my role. They are generally asking me what I think about other people's roles. I can't force a certain role on anyone. I think that you have to feel it. I mean if you feel a responsibility as I do to the tradition, to the black tradition and black culture, and that is what I have decided that I wanted to work out of, then you do it. But there are many black writers that don't, and I can't force them to. You're not going to get work from them. I guess that each individual working as an artist has to decide what he wants to do with his art. So, I can't force on blacks a certain role as a writer or a certain responsibility as a writer if they themselves do not feel or see that.

Q: In some comments you made about your plays, you said that you wanted to have the audience become aware that the people were Africans, that they have this African background.

A: Yes, I said that about all the plays. I think it's important for people to recognize the fact that these thirty million black people in America are Africans, that they came from Africa. They've lived here since the early part of the seventeenth century and there's a tendency to forge that. Recently we are seeing the terminology, African American, it has become something that Jesse Jackson uses, and you would see it in *The New York Times* editorial, etc. We have never had any problem with the African part, we've always been African. It's the American part that we have trouble with. You know, I find it amazing, actually, that people will, for instance, come and see *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and not recognize all the characters on stage as being African. I don't know where they think they came from. I actually asked an audience one time, did you recognize the people as Africans, and about three-hundred

people were sitting there and nobody would say that they were African people. It's so obvious. But, yet, as I found out people don't recognize that. So, I think what I try to do is to utilize the black culture, that field of manners and ritual intercourse that could sustain a man once he's left his father's house. Then I think by questioning that field of manner and ritual intercourse, you can see that it's not European, so it must be African. You are able then to see the people, although they are Americans, they have only been in America for 369 years now, that they are Africans. They have African sensibilities, they actually do things differently, see the world differently. All the things that are attendant to culture. Black-Americans--we decorate our houses differently, we have different values. We value style, we value linguistic ability. Everything is different because it's speaks to our sensibilities. We bury our dead differently. We do all the things that people do in life and we have a different culture. You know if you go down to Mexico they do it differently down over there and the Chinese do it another way. Europeans do it yet another way. We just happen to be over here in America, but we are still African. Although the geography is different, the culture is very strong and very much alive.

Q: I'm glad that you explained all that. Could you tell me, what do you think about the terms African-American and black?

A: I prefer African-American. It does say something about the culture.

Q: I have read several comments of yours to the effect that you feel passionately about what you are putting on the stage and this seems to me to be a very distinct quality that comes through when the audience sees the play.

A: Well, I have a very intense concern about the situation of the blacks in America and our historical treatment, if you will, in American society. I care very deeply about that. So when I go to the materials out of which to fashion my art, I'm actually treading sacred ground, in the sense that I'm taking these people's lives and they have fought very hard to maintain the idea of self, the affirmation of the value and worth of one's being. They have fought very hard for this, so utilizing this information, I owe it a certain respect and I see it as a tremendous . . . almost as a sacred duty on my part. Everyone must find some one way to fit in the world, something to do with your hands, so to speak, some way to put them to use. I discovered that I have this ability to make words and conjure images and make things. . . . So, I take the responsibility of that very seriously and I feel very passionately about what I am doing.

Q: I wonder if you could extend that a little. Could you talk about the state of American playwriting? Do you go see plays very often?

A: No. It's not only that I don't see plays, but I also don't see movies. I haven't been to a movie in nine years. I mean, I see a few plays, but I don't as a rule go.

Q: Do you have much of a sense about the state of American playwrighting today?

A: Well, I kind of do, in the sense that I spent four summers at the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center's National Playwrights Conference. The O'Neill invites fifteen playwrights every year, so that's sixty playwrights right there, and I'm a member of New Dramatists and there's another forty-four playwrights there, some of whom I know, most of whom I know. And here in St. Paul and Minneapolis, they have the Playwright's Center so there are a lot of playwrights here in the Twin Cities. So, as a result of that, particularly at the O'Neill, I have gotten to see a lot of new plays and meet a lot of new playwrights. What I discovered is I'm very concerned about the quality of the plays that are being written. For the most part they're not very good and I think partly the reason for that is the influence, the tremendous influence that television has had. I think this is the first generation of playwrights who actually grew up on TV. As a result of that, they have had a lot of plays resemble television sitcoms and that's because as opposed to reading literature, they watch TV. I've found, for instance . . . I've gone to the O'Neill and I've found that among the playwrights who were there, there weren't very many who wanted to talk poetry and literature, who knew authors, writers, who had read novels. They were actually in a very small world. They talked a lot of movies. Some of the older playwrights would talk about poetry and art and literature and the photography and sculpture and whatever. But, for the most part the playwrights that I have been exposed to, primarily the younger ones at the O'Neill, they talk movies and TV. So, as a result, I think that's why they produce the kind of work they do. I think it's had a bad influence on writing in the sense that it's not viewed as literature. A lot of playwrights see themselves as merely craftsmen, as opposed to artists. This is the idea, I mean an attitude and idea that they have about themselves. A lot of them are writing plays, but they really want to write TV and they really want to write movies, and somehow writing the play is an entrée into the other world of movies and TV.

Q: You know, I think you would have had an interesting conversation with Eugene O'Neill, if he had lived longer or you had been born earlier, he loved reading so much, too. Are you able to spend much time reading?

A: I used to read an awful lot. I haven't read very much in the past three or four years, but I think plays should be considered a part of literature. I

certainly see my plays that way and I try to accomplish that when I sit down and write, because then you have a longer tradition that's supporting you.

Q: One of the critics threw out about you, "In forty years he will still be the playwright we will be hearing about," and I thought that that was a very nice observation because you do indeed write things that I think are not just particular to the moment and which have a literary value.

A: Well, I try, yes.

Q: So, you would see that as part of your purpose then in writing?

A: Oh, sure. I aspire to the highest art.

Q: That's nice to hear, that really is. We have covered quite a few things. I wonder, if you have any comments you might make about the plays being put on by the Negro Ensemble Company.

A: Well, I never have actually seen a production at the NEC, but NEC certainly exists in my mind as an important company. At one time, when there were only a few black theatres, it was always the place that one aspired to write for. I always wanted to write plays that would be done at NEC. And I went to the O'Neill and in the process there I met Lloyd and Lloyd had a theatre, and so I went to Yale and I never got the opportunity to work at NEC.

Q: You know, we've mentioned your plays being produced at Yale, but of course, now, they are really being presented all over America. Do you get a chance to go and see them at a number of places?

A: I do, every chance I get I love to go. I saw *Joe Turner* in San Francisco and I saw it in Baltimore and Atlanta. They were all very different, but all very good productions. That was kind of fun. The closest you can come to seeing the play fresh is to not be involved in the play and then go see someone put it on. You're not sure how they are going to do particular parts, so, it's almost like seeing it for the first time.

Q: Oh, that's very nice. Have you been having performances in foreign countries very much yet?

A: Not very much. I think they are going to do *Fences* in Amsterdam and in Uganda also.

A: Oh, great.

A: I think it will be great . . . They have a very domestically oriented theatre there.

Q: Well, I'm sure that in time they will really be done internationally and that will be quite nice for the status of American theater. As you know I'll be presenting a paper about your plays and showing slides of the productions at Yale to the International Federation for Theatre Research World Congress in Stockholm in June, and it will be interesting to get a response from international scholars.

Q: For the future, do you plan to continue to work with Lloyd Richards at Yale?

A: Yes, and probably wherever he goes after that.

Q: It sounds like you have a wonderful relationship there. Do you feel fortunate to have met him at the O'Neill?

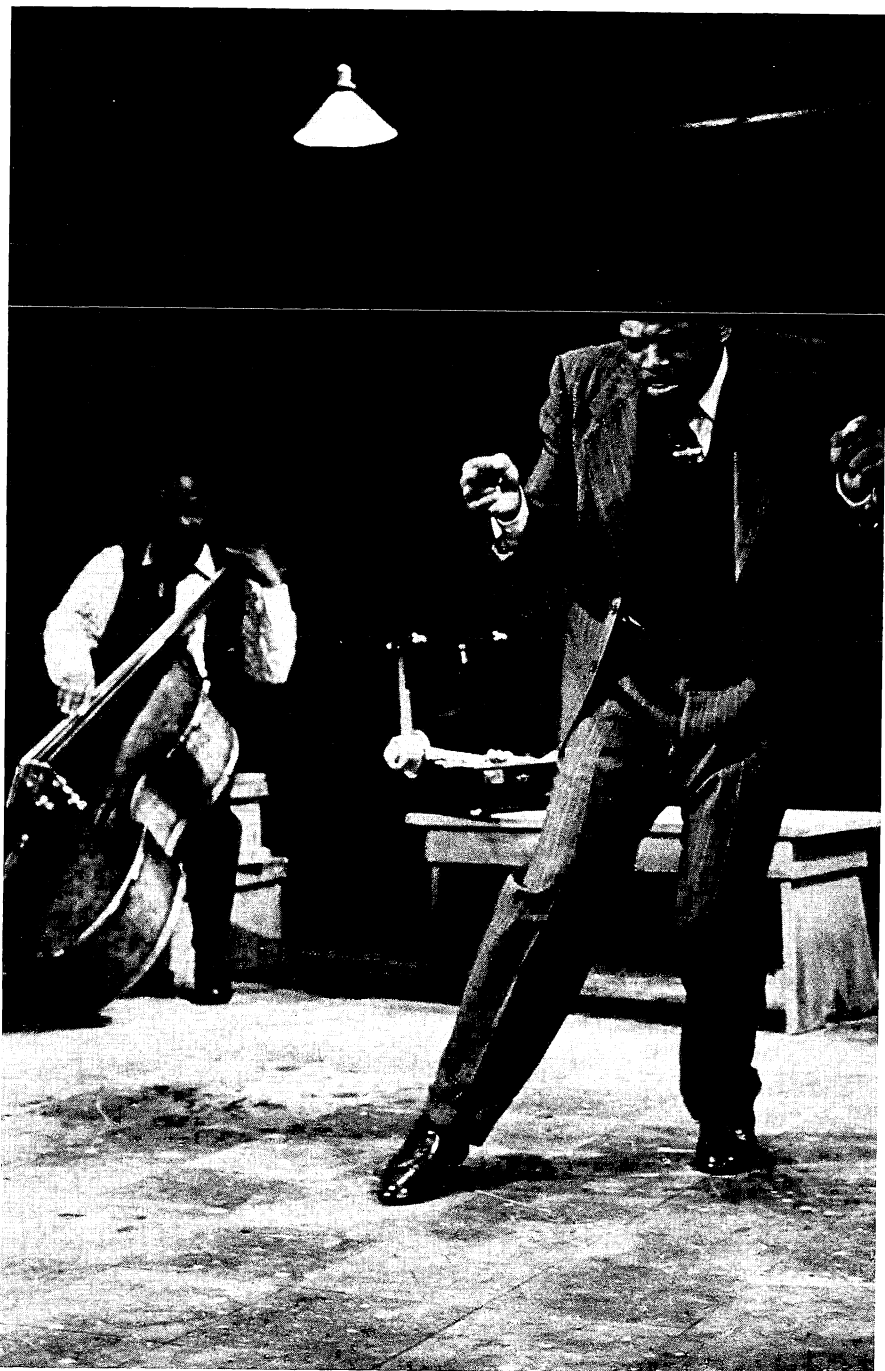
A: No question. Without question he's been singularly important to both my work and my career.

Q: I thank you very much and I'll look forward to seeing *Two Trains Running*.

Boulder, Colorado



James Earl Jones appears as Troy Maxson in August Wilson's new play, *Fences*. Photograph by William B. Carter.



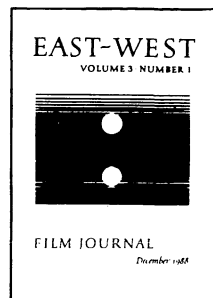
Leonard Jackson and Charles S. Dutton in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.
Photograph by William B. Carter

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