

August Wilson and the Contemporary Theatre

Interviewed by Yvonne Shafer

In April 1997 August Wilson's play *Jitney* opened at the Crossroads Theatre in New Brunswick, New Jersey preparatory to a New York opening scheduled for the fall. Wilson was in residence at the theatre. The play is the seventh of his to open in New York and is part of his plan for a cycle of plays dealing with each of the decades of the twentieth century. Beginning with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1985, each of his plays has won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award as Best Play of the Year. He has also won two Pulitzer Prizes as well as Tony Awards. He is one of seven American playwrights to win more than one Pulitzer Prize and one of only three African American playwrights to be so honored. By 1988 he was described as the foremost dramatist of the American black experience and by 1990 the most acclaimed playwright of his time.

Wilson was born in 1945 in Pittsburgh. He dropped out of high school and worked at various jobs. He educated himself in the public library and was particularly attracted to poetry. He first wrote poems, then turned to writing plays. His first success in theatre came in 1982 when *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was accepted at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's Playwright Conference and Lloyd Richards took an interest in directing it for Yale Repertory and then bringing it in to New York. By this time Wilson had moved to St. Paul where he wrote plays for the Science Museum and worked as a cook until he was able to devote himself to playwriting thanks to fellowships. He continued to work with Richards and to return to O'Neill Conference. In recent years he moved to Seattle, married costumer Constanza Romano, and continued his work on the cycle of plays. In 1996 he was honored at the William Inge Festival which was devoted to him. In June of that year he was asked to be the keynote speaker at the Theatre Communications Group conference where he delivered a speech which stunned some listeners and aroused considerable controversy. He was attacked for the speech by critic Robert Brustein and the resulting argument in print between the two men inspired Anna Deavere Smith to organize a so-called debate between the two men at Town Hall in Manhattan in January 1997. It

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Scene featuring Rose (Rebecca) and Troy Maxon (Lou Bellamy) in *Fences* by August Wilson at the Penumbra. (Director: Clude Purdy) Courtesy Penumbra.

attracted a full house and many people tried unsuccessfully to get tickets for it. As a result it received wide coverage in the press and public radio. Wilson comments on that event in this interview. The last interview with Wilson by Shafer was published in this journal in the Fall 1989 issue. The production of a new August Wilson play arouses considerable interest in theatre critics throughout the country. So when the Crossroads Theatre Company (the only African-American LORT theatre) produced his play *Jitney* in May 1997, the American Theatre Critics Association decided that for the first time in the history of their mini-conferences they would arrange a trip from Manhattan to New Jersey where the critics could see the play and meet the actors following the production. The production was enthusiastically received by the critics.

YS: Your play *Jitney* will open here at the Crossroads Theatre in a little more than a week, but you actually wrote it quite a while—

AW: Eighteen years ago.

YS: I know it was produced at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul and also in Pittsburgh?

AW: We did a production in Pittsburgh in '82 and then at Penumbra in '85 and then last May we did a production in Pittsburgh.

YS: Was it a full evening at Penumbra? I thought it was something like an hour and a half.

AW: Oh, it was a full evening. I couldn't say exactly how long it was—it wasn't as long as my other plays. We played it with an intermission and it was two hours.

YS: And have you now rewritten it?

AW: Yes. I did some work on it. It's now two and a *half* hours. Actually, one of the actors in Pittsburgh came up to me and he said, "Hey man, dey ain' gonna know this is your play." I said, "Why?" He said, "It ain' got no monologues in it." So I said, "Okay, I'll have one for you tomorrow." So I put in a couple of monologues to flesh out the character.

YS: I see Walter Dallas is directing *Jitney* as he did *Seven Guitars* in Chicago at the Goodman Theatre when Lloyd Richards was ill.

AW: Yes, Walter is a very good director.

YS: Is there a plan to take this production into New York?

AW: We're going to go to the Huntington Theatre in Boston and then the Manhattan Theatre Club in New York in November.

YS: That should be exciting. I'll be part of the group of theatre critics coming here to the Crossroads Theatre in early May to see *Jitney* as a part of the American Theatre Critics Association conference in New York. There's a strong interest in your new work. Will you tell me something about the play you're now writing which is set in the '80s? I read a while ago that it has to do with an African American family and the problems of life in a violent society—is that right?

AW: Yes, something of that sort. I'm looking at African American life in 1985 and the violence that was attendant in a situation where we have some people whose sense of self-worth was so fragile that something as simple as someone calling them their name could be an occasion for murder. As it turns out the father of this character has killed a man, his surrogate father had killed two men, and he's killed a man and he's 36 years old in 1985. So I'm looking at his particular family structure—I think he has a seventeen year old son who's getting ready to kill somebody—so I'm looking at his family structure to see how this happens.

YS: Do you have a working title for it?

AW: It's called *King Hedley II*.

YS: Is it the same spelling as "Hedley" in *Seven Guitars*?

AW: Exactly.

YS: Is that the name of a relative of yours?

AW: Uh, no.

YS: But sometimes you have used names of your relatives?

AW: Yes, I've used my grandfather, and my father, and my grandmother. No, Hedley was not a relative of mine. But King Hedley is in *Seven Guitars*—his name is King, as he explains to Ruby. Now she has a baby and she says, "If it's a boy, I'm gonna name it King." So it turns out to be a boy and she calls it King and that's King Hedley II. And one of the other characters in the play is the baby. Red Carter is celebrating by passing out cigars, and at that time he says he and his wife have named "Mister."

YS: Oh, white folks won't like that! as Canewell says in the play.

AW: Exactly. And Ruby is also a character, she's sixty-some years old. What happened was she took the baby and left it with Louise and then took off and I don't know where she went. That's what I want to find out: where she went, what she's looking for, why her life turned out the way it did, what the content of it was. And then I look at King who was raised by Louise. You know Hedley had killed two men—Floyd and the other man—and the guy—his father, turns out to be Elmore who had killed Leroy down in Alabama. Ruby said she didn't know which man was the father, that she hoped it was Leroy, but it was Elmore. So that makes his father a murderer and his surrogate father had killed two men. He has a vicious scar across his face here and he was down in the penitentiary for killing someone—so I'm not quite sure what it's all about yet, I'm still working on it.

YS: Do you enjoy the process of writing?

AW: Oh, I love it. The last time I looked, King and Mister were talking and they were arguing about something—there was this guy who left his car on the bridge and the assumption was that he jumped off the bridge. But they haven't found his body and the one guy says that he committed suicide, but the other says no, he drove his car with his wife in another behind, you know, and they actually get into an argument about this that may escalate into violence. Somehow in the process of talking about that, they're actually talking about something else, and nerves are struck, so it's not really about that, it's about other things. So we'll keep working on it.

YS: Do you have any idea when you'll have *King Hedley II* ready to go into production?

AW: I don't know. I think maybe sometime next year.

YS: It must have been a big change to move from St. Paul to Seattle. Did it slow down your writing? There was a little gap between *Two Trains Running* and *Seven Guitars*.

AW: As it turned out, yes there was.

YS: Another big change must have been when you quit smoking several packs of cigarettes a day at about that time. Was it hard?

AW: No. I never tried to quit before. I just quit and I didn't have any craving or anything. I don't wish I had a cigarette. This whole diner could be full of people smoking and it wouldn't make me want to smoke.

YS: Did you find a diner in Seattle like the ones in St. Paul and New Haven where you liked to sit and write your plays?

AW: Well, I found this place and I went in and saw all these guys sitting around writing. There were about twelve guys there writing and I thought this is going to be great. So I sat down and nothing happened, I just couldn't write. And I thought "These guys are using up all the creativity in the place!" So I found someplace else.

YS: That's funny. How about your approach to writing? Has it changed? Do you still write on napkins in diners? Or do you actually write in a notebook?

AW: Well, of course, I have a notebook also. But I still do it pretty much the same way. I think what it is, one time a very young waitress asked me, "Do you write on napkins because it really doesn't count?" And that struck me and I realized that's exactly why I do it. Because you're not writing, you're not conscious of writing, you're just scribbling on a napkin and if it doesn't come, it doesn't work—it's a napkin, you can throw it away. Whereas, if you open your tablet, and now you're officially writing, you become conscious of what it is that you're doing. I still do it pretty much the same way that I've always done. I don't always start on a napkin, but very often I use that to jot down ideas.

YS: But then, ultimately, you type them.

AW: I write in my notebooks and then I go home and I often say that is where the real work begins in a way, that's where the headwork begins. I take it out of the notebooks and then I rewrite it and type it. I may work it some more, do

whatever. The notebook writing, the initial thing is more of a . . . I don't quite know how to say it, but . . . it just comes out. And then I fashion and shape it.

YS: But you're still using a typewriter?

AW: I'm using a computer. But I'm going to go back to my typewriter. I wrote my last two plays on a computer. It's a different way of working—it's a different tool.

YS: It's not that same typewriter you bought for \$20 when you first started to write!

AW: Oh, no! God no. I've gone through so many typewriters since then. No, I have an IBM. But it's a different way of working. I'm going to try that again.

YS: In terms of your own life, I know you enjoy writing, and that you enjoy traveling around and seeing different actors in your plays, do you do anything else? I mean do you play any sport, for example?

AW: Well, I was a pretty decent baseball player, but now, no, I don't play any sport.

YS: Well, after July, you'll have a little child to be playing with.

AW: Oh, yeah. That'll be fun.

YS: But is your wife continuing her career as a costumer as well as being a mother?

AW: Yes, she is. She did the costumes for *Jitney*.

YS: I loved her costumes for *Seven Guitars*.

AW: Yes, she's good. A good designer.

YS: You like to go to art museums, I believe. Of course, you have often mentioned the influence of the artist Romare Beardon on your plays.

AW: Oh, sure. Of course my wife is interested in art. She dabbled in pottery and she knows a great deal more about it than I do.



Scene from the Arizona Theatre Company's production of August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* directed by Benny Sato Ambush, 1997. (Photo: Tim Fuller, courtesy Arizona Theatre Company)

YS: Are you going to go to the O'Neill Center this summer?

AW: No. I usually visit, but this summer I can't because of my wife's pregnancy and I'd just be getting home. Unless for some reason I find it necessary to come to the East Coast in July, then of course I'd go up there. It's so wonderful. I've spent so much time up there, worked as a dramaturg for a couple of years. It was fun.

YS: What about your film script for *Fences*? What's going to happen about that?

AW: I wish I knew. It's going on ten years now.

YS: I know, and Eddie Murphy is too old for it now.

AW: Way too old. I'm going to have a meeting at Paramount next month and I'll know better after that.

YS: Are you still interested in having the movie made? I know you've often said you don't really care about movies.

AW: I don't sit by my telephone waiting for it to ring. It would be nice if they'd make the movie, but I'm—you know (shrugging his shoulders).

YS: But would James Earl Jones still play it?

AW: He's too old, too.

YS: I saw it in New York with him and loved it.

AW: He was very good. If they'd made the film five, six, seven years ago it would have been a lovely film. They'd have had a great performance from him, I'm sure. Now I don't know who you would even cast in it, but there are actors out there.

YS: There's almost an August Wilson Actor Industry. Some of these actors like Jim Pond and Kim Sullivan go around the country just being in your different plays.

AW: It makes me feel so good to have strangers, actors, come up to me and they'll introduce themselves and say, "Man, you helpin' to feed my family. I've been in your play and if it weren't for you, I wouldn't be workin'." And that is good because there are a lot of opportunities and a lot of different roles. *Seven Guitars*, there are about four or five productions right now. And different actors go from one to another. One of the actors in *Jitney* was in *Seven Guitars* in Atlanta—so that's very exciting, all kinds of stuff like that.

YS: Yes, that actor I sat next to in *Seven Guitars* had just been in *Jitney* in Pittsburgh. He was completely entranced, and I said to him, "You're trying to figure out which role you'll play next." The actresses were so good in *Seven Guitars*. It's nice to see an expansion of women's roles in your plays.

AW: I think that's largely come about because the actresses come up to me and they say, "Hey, where are the roles for us?" and I say, "I'm workin' on it." Actually, in the early writing of this play there were no women characters in it. These women more or less forced themselves into place. I was working with these guys, all this happening in my head, and one of them said, "What the hell's she doin' here?" and there's this woman sitting there and he said, "Tell her to get the hell out of here." And I said, "Wait a minute, let me go talk to her" and they said "We don't want her. Tell her to get out. It's supposed to be an all-male play." So I went over (all this in my head) and I said, "Excuse me, what are you

doing?” and she said, “I want my own space,” and I said, “You want your own scene,” and she said, “No, I want my own space,” and I didn’t know what she meant and this guy didn’t either, so he said, “Tell her to get the hell out.” So I just closed my tablet and they all disappeared and I walked around for a couple of months and then one day I said, “Okay, come on. You got your own space.” And then I wrote this scene between her and Floyd. Floyd and this woman, I didn’t even know who she was at the time. It turned out to be Vera. And after she came in, right behind her came the other two women, Louise and Ruby.

YS: It’s fun to hear you talk about them like that. I wonder if all playwrights talk about the characters as if they actually exist. I know Ibsen did. He spoke of Nora walking by him in a pretty blue dress.

While *Seven Guitars* was in New York you did a number of public readings. I read about one in a library in New York City. I imagine you enjoyed that quite a lot didn’t you?

AW: It was a lot of fun.

YS: Did you just read poems, or did you read parts from the plays?

AW: I read parts from the plays and parts that had been taken out, parts that I’d cut from the play—outtakes. And I did the Vera/Floyd scene. I read Vera.

YS: I wish I could have heard it. Have you ever taped any of the readings?

AW: No.

YS: I wish you would. I’d like to ask you something about your present situation as a playwright in America. When you started, when *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* opened in New York, you were just a guy from Pittsburgh who had written some poems and he now had written a play and he’d been at the O’Neill Center. Now you have won Pulitzer Prizes, Drama Critics Circle Awards, and Tony Awards, et cetera. How has your situation changed or how is it perceived as changed?

AW: I’m perceived differently, but in *my* perception I’m basically still a guy from Pittsburgh who wrote some poems (I still write poetry), and I wrote a play and went to the O’Neill. The difference is I’ve been to the O’Neill four times now and I’ve had plays on Broadway and that has altered people’s perception of me. I’ve got a little older, but I’m pretty much the same person. I’ve grown as an

artist and I've grown as a man, too, I suspect. But I'm amazed that people's perception of me is different and I don't always know what the perception is.

YS: I know that you said some time ago that you read the critics and what they write about your plays and that sometimes you learn something and find it worthwhile. Do you still feel that?

AW: Yes, I do.

YS: But you have, nevertheless, the feeling that there are things that the critics, or at least some of them, could be doing, or should be doing better about theatre than they are?

AW: Oh, sure. I think that all of us, playwrights and all, could be doing better for the theatre, the critics as well. But they're on the forefront. Their job is to guide the art, to lead to the development of the art form which I think is the function of all criticism if it's done right. I think that in a situation in which you have critics whose tools—analytical tools—were developed forty years ago, sometimes twenty years ago, thirty years ago—I think you have a sense of the society and the culture and the art form changing and you have to keep your critical tools current. And when you sit down and you read a critic who writes “well, so-and-so and so-and-so is a neo-classical German influence” . . . well, I'm glad you're able to recognize that, I don't know how many other people can. But since you can recognize a neo-classical German influence should you not be able to recognize a blues influence? Something contemporary about the culture in which you live and which you are reviewing? So I find that a lot of the critics' tools are old—they're outdated, but they're still applying them to contemporary works, whether they're black, or white, or whatever. So the guy who is influenced by television, the current playwright influenced by television, influenced by the values of society and is trying to write about that and here is this critic coming from way over there—he comes with his “neo-classical German influence” and all these other outdated critical tools and now he's going to pass judgment on a work that he really doesn't know anything about, because he hasn't kept up. And I think it's the same for music critics, I can't imagine a music critic who isn't aware of the influence of rappers and the influence of certain kinds of rock and roll or rhythm and blues or popular music and their methods. I would think all critics would keep up. I would assume that there's new stuff happening and that they should be able to comment on that. I think it should also be important enough that the newspapers should give a few more column inches to

a critic when he is writing a review. I look at Howard Kissel and he's got 500 words or less in *USA Today*. They must not take it seriously.

YS: Yes, it's discouraging. Just a few years ago the theatre section was an important individual part of the *New York Times* and now it may be in the sports section or the Metro section. The newspapers gave a lot of coverage to the speech you gave and the so-called debate at Town Hall. Have you anything to say about the views you expressed?

AW: Well, I think we lost ground in the sense that there were 66 LORT theatres, only one of which was black, and now there are 67 LORT theatres and it would be nice to say that two of them are black, but no, there's still just one that is black. So we've added another theatre. I think that you come down to power and resources and a society that can allocate them. It's not a new question, it's an age-old question, I think it's always been about the resources, the scarce resources and the competition for them. The idea of integration was the sharing of the basis that could provide access to the resources by removing the race based privilege. That hasn't happened, so I think that the progress that we're perceived as having made is really a false progress. It's a camouflage; it's an illusion of progress. So you look over the theatre and I think that we have an illusion of progress within the theatre in actuality. And I find that disheartening because there is this opportunity: if we are going to have an American theatre, and you're going to define it as American, then it should be a theatre, the values of which are made up of all the people in American society: the Asians, Hispanics, African Americans, Indians, whoever, should contribute toward the development of the value of that particular theatre so that you emerge with something that is American. Right now we have a European theatre in America, European based theatre in America, very little other influence, very few Hispanic, or Asian, or black influences. So we just kind of go along, and go along, and go along, and we could go for another hundred years, but we're not going to develop an American theatre unless all the different ethnic and racial groups that make up America are allowed to participate in the development, the defining of the values that are that theatre. That would be my comment on that.

YS: One time I saw that someone had written that you enjoyed the thought of being a spokesperson for the people on the Hill in Pittsburgh and conceivably other groups of African Americans. Is that accurate?

AW: I never view myself as a spokesman for anyone. I never said that. In fact, the opposite: the people have loud and articulate voices, you just have to listen to

them. They're speaking very loudly about things that concern them, what they want. They don't need a spokesman.

YS: I know that when you gave your speech to the TCG Conference in June, you said that those were your views, that you weren't speaking for anybody else. Do you never feel that you would . . . well, take a stand in a political area of activity in America? Would you, for example, support some candidate?

AW: Probably. I'll never say no; I'm not sure.

YS: But you never have?

AW: No. I never have. I'm not an advocate of that—I'm an artist. I'm only trying to write my plays. I look around and I see other artists, very often other playwrights, artists and playwrights, actors and whatnot who do not have opportunities to develop their art, to develop their craft, and I watch year after year after year in the same situation and twelve years later nothing has happened. That person isn't any closer to having opportunities, to have productions, to develop their art, something's wrong, something is amiss and I look at situations and I become concerned. I guess I would say I would be an advocate for improving these situations, rather than for Joe Smith to get elected for senator or congressman or mayor. Because I think so often when you look at situations where black people were elected (for example going back to Kenneth Gibson and Newark, when we believed in the process of electing black mayors in cities that would have some impact on the lives of of the people that were living there) it's ineffectual. No, in some cases it got worse because the power is not concentrated in the hands of the mayor, it's concentrated in the hands of those who own the banks, who have the money. And Newark has Prudential Life Insurance, et cetera. Those people actually have more power than the elected officials, who were elected, more or less, to represent running it for those guys.

YS: Just one thing along that line, do you view yourself, through your work, as making a political statement?

AW: Oh, no question, yes. I do, yes.

YS: Will your next play be even more so?

AW: Well, I try to keep the polemic out of my work. What I hear . . . I don't know what will happen, I just let the pieces fall where they may, so to speak, and

maintain a truth to my art. And I don't care. I don't mince my words and whatever is there is there. Whether that casts black Americans in a bad light (laughing), well, maybe we need to be cast in a bad light when we're running around killing one another, et cetera. So wherever all that falls, I stay true to the art form and leave the polemic out for another time and another occasion—I don't want to mix it up with my art.

YS: Related to that, if I may ask, were you disturbed or disappointed, by the reaction of some African Americans to your comments at Town Hall and to the speech you gave at TCG?

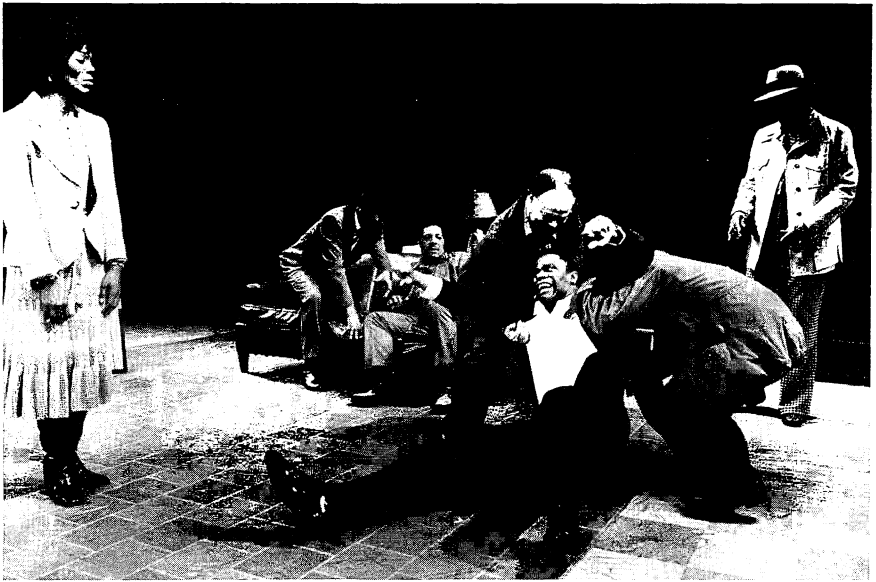
AW: Well, I haven't seen too much.

YS: Well, some of the comments during the Town Hall discussion?

AW: Oh, you mean when that guy called me a Fascist? To call me a Fascist while real Fascism rages around without comment is intellectual dishonesty or cowardice, one of the two. But I'm not surprised or disappointed. Here again, it's just hard to get five people to agree on something, let alone a whole theatre full. And I'm sure there are many blacks who feel differently than I feel, who feel that blacks are participating because they point to certain blacks who are positioned as they would not be otherwise, myself being one of them, "Oh, look at you!" Yes, that has nothing to do with the fact that we have only one theatre out of the 67 LORT theatres. All these instances of so-called being included, I can see how people could say that, but I would point out how we're actually being excluded by the idea of being included; how that works against us. If you give money to white theatres to develop diverse audiences, that money is given to white institutions at the cost of black institutions. They have to compete with these theatres for the same audience and they're not given money to develop their audience or their craft, or to develop the theatre.

YS: Does the Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul suffer that way, would you say?

AW: Yes, I do. Absolutely. Particularly with the Guthrie. So what they're now trying to bridge is a gap by doing a production of Penumbra's *Fences* at the Guthrie Theatre. They're trying to make something new happen at a position where it's not a paternalistic thing on the part of the Guthrie, it's kind of a co-sharing. You put Penumbra as the controlling factor in the Guthrie but they're not often in that position, you know. So people are trying new things and different things, but all black institutions are still in danger.



Jerome Preston Bates, (seated on floor) who plays Booster in August Wilson's *Jitney* at Crossroads Theatre in 1997 is comforted by other actors in the play. (Photo by Glen Frieson, courtesy Crossroads Theatre, New Brunswick, New Jersey)

YS: You said that you would like to have a playwrights conference for African American playwrights somewhere in the South. Did anybody pick up on that?

AW: Yes, there are people who are interested and are working to make that happen. I thought it could happen in '98, but it will probably happen in '99 which would probably be better as it's right on the cusp and a good time to meet and prepare ourselves for going into the new century. So, it's definitely in the works.

YS: How many playwrights would you guess might participate?

AW: Oh, hundreds—literally. I mean a lot of people define themselves as playwrights and I think we'll have a big participation.

YS: I recently finished a book on American women playwrights in the first half of the century and I was so pleased to be able to get so much material about African American women playwrights in this period. But people don't really have an idea of how many playwrights there are. Where do you think this conference might take place? In Atlanta?

AW: Atlanta is a good city. I think it should be in the South, particularly as it's our ancestral homeland. Actually I'm all for making it someplace where people have to leave their homes and come someplace. Which means I don't want anything else going on. They're just coming specifically for this and they're coming to work—leave their party clothes at home because this is a working conference and—you know—make it difficult to get there so the people who are there are actually people who want to be there, the people who see a value. I'm not looking for people who just show up and say, "What's happening?" and I think as we develop the kind of conference it will be that will define itself.

YS: Will you take an active role in organizing it?

AW: I'm not sure at this point, but I suspect I'll take an active role in its organization. But I've got to write my plays.