

At A Noise Within in Pasadena, a first-rate ensemble is performing *King Hedley II* (through April 28), one of the lesser-known plays in August Wilson's justly celebrated American Century Cycle. The 10-play cycle brilliantly depicts the African American experience over the course of the 20th century, with Wilson himself described as "our American Shakespeare" by the theater's co-artistic directors.

Despite the play's relative obscurity, it proves as potent as any in the award-winning cycle, with a striking visual opening that foreshadows the ending. *Hedley* is set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, like all but one of the ten plays. The titular character (played by Aaron Jennings) is a proud ex-con who struggles with the economic reality of trying to rebuild his life, while confronting the challenges facing a black man in his situation.

No spoilers, but just when you think the play is going to mimic a key plot element of *Hamlet*, it throws you a curve ball. Gregg T. Daniel directs with aplomb, guiding standout performances by Ben Cain (as the longtime flame of Hedley's mother) and Gerald C. Rivers (as the eccentric neighborhood truthsayer). Tix and info: anoisewithin.org.