

# August Wilson play offers political hope with challenging choices

By Bridgette M. Redman

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Today's politics are filled with rancor and division, leaving a public who is skeptical that politicians are ever truthful or committed to doing what is right. It's why a play like August Wilson's "Radio Golf" can restore hope and refocus a weary audience.

In it, a Black mayoral candidate must choose between political expediency and his integrity.

A Noise Within will produce this final play in Wilson's 10-play Pittsburgh Cycle, the third one they have staged in recent years. Opening Sunday, Oct. 16, and running through Sunday, Nov. 13, the show is directed by Gregg T. Daniel, who has directed and performed all around Los Angeles, including the two prior Wilson plays at A Noise Within.

Daniel says these three shows are just the start of what A Noise Within hopes will be a production of all ten of Wilson's sweeping plays, the works that placed him among the greats in the American literary canon. "Radio Golf" was the last play he wrote in 2005 before dying that year of liver cancer.

"How audacious to write a 10-play cycle representing every decade to chronicle African American life," Daniel said. "It is so ambitious to write ten plays and he did. This is the very last one in the cycle."

The plays span 90 years starting with "Gem of the Ocean" in 1904 and ending with "Radio Golf," which is set in 1997. Each play stands alone and while there are some characters that make appearances in multiple stories and nine of them are set in Pittsburgh's Hill District, they aren't a serial story. They weren't written in order, and it isn't necessary to see them in order.

"Audiences don't need to be familiar with Wilson's other plays to fully appreciate 'Radio Golf,'" A Noise Within co-artistic director Geoff Elliott said. "But those who saw 'Gem of the Ocean' here in 2019 might recognize certain references. The plays in the cycle reflect and echo one another."

At the center of this play is developer Harmond Wilks, played by Christian Telesmar. He and his golfing buddy Roosevelt Hicks (DeJuan Christopher) have a plan to tear down the buildings in the dilapidated neighborhood where they grew up and gentrify it. Harmond and his wife, Mame (Sydney A. Mason), consider it key to getting him elected as the first Black mayor of Pittsburgh.

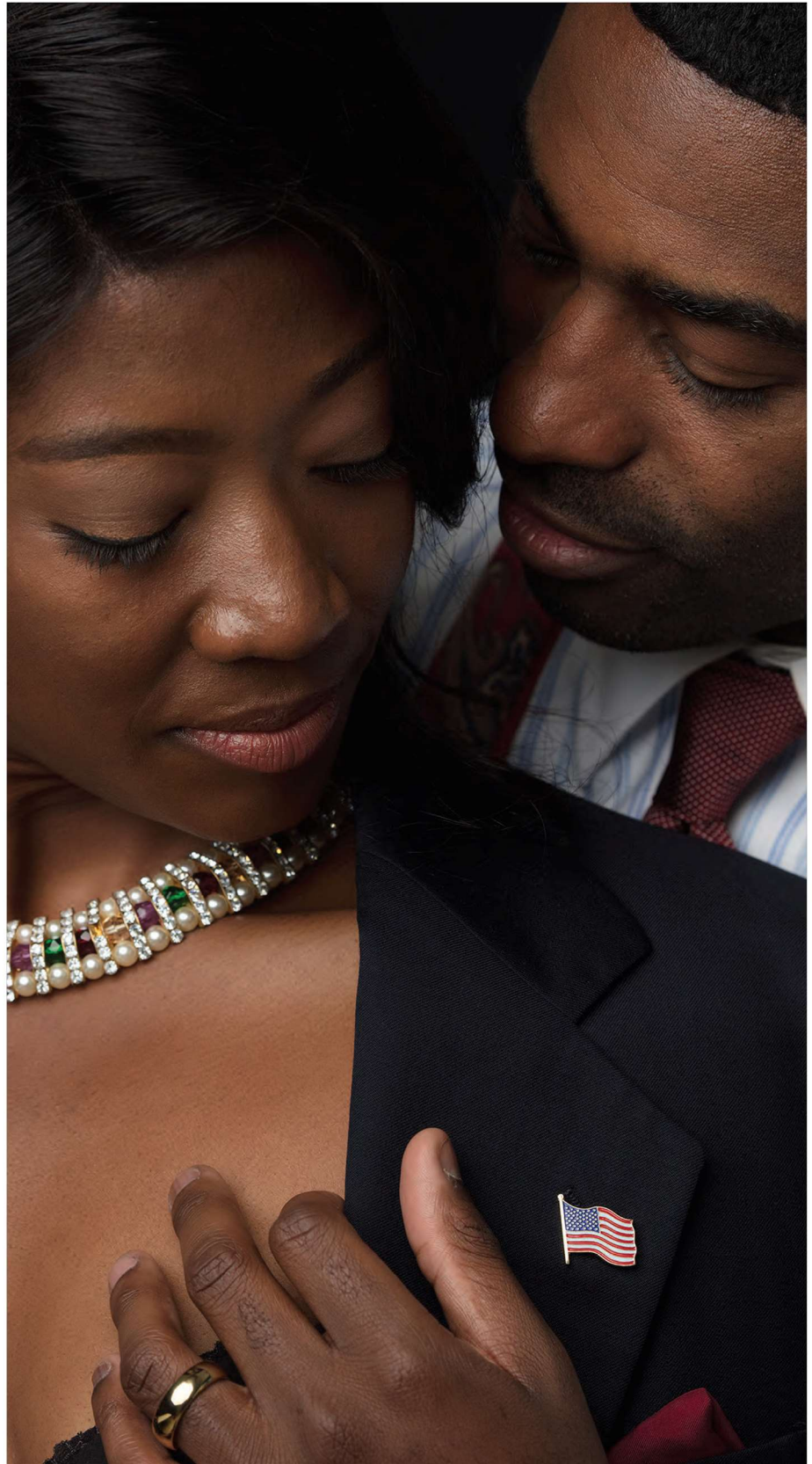
Then Elder Joseph Barlow (Alex Morris) and handyman Sterling Johnson (Gilbert Glenn Brown) show up determined to save one of the ramshackle old homes from being demolished.

Daniel said this play leaves us with hope.

"These are not destitute people out of slavery trying to find freedom or trying to find a job," Daniel said. "The two leads, Harmond and his wife, are upper middle class. Think of them as the Obamas. They're upper middle-class people who are climbing the social ladder. (Wilson) was very concerned at one point that the middle-class and upper-class Blacks were leaving behind the underclass, that somehow they weren't as worried or as committed to helping and bringing up the underclass. He was really bothered by that and thinking about that."

While Roosevelt and Harmond both went to the Ivy League Cornell University, Joe and Sterling bring the August Wilson flavor to the play. Daniel says that while they appear disheveled, a lot of wisdom comes out of their mouths.

"It ends with a kind of hope," Daniel said, "because by the end of it, Harmond realizes you have to acknowledge and work



Actors Sydney A. Mason and Christian Telesmar play characters struggling with the clash between heritage and progress, expediency and integrity in "Radio Golf" at A Noise Within.

Continued on page 16

Continued from page 15

with the past to determine who you are in the present and to determine what the future is.”

The hope he says, is important in a nation that has been traumatized by the very publicized murders of several Black people over the past years along with the pandemic. It offers a path to reconciliation and reformation. Even though Harmond has to make a choice and faces sacrifice, Daniel points out that he gains the world because he discovers who he is.

While the plays stand alone, audiences who attended “Gem of the Ocean” in 2019 will recognize a lot of references in “Radio Golf.” The home that is being defended was where Aunt Ester, a 285-year-old matriarch, practiced healing.

Daniel said there is also an evolution in the way the characters speak, something he has worked on with the actors. At the beginning, Harmond’s language is lacking rhythm and musicality.

“That is purposeful, because it really is a play about gentrification and assimilation,” Daniel said. “Harmond and Roosevelt in some way have been assimilated, but what does assimilation cost? What’s the price we pay for assimilation? They are distanced from those natural heartbeats of the community. It’s not until Elder Joe Barlow comes in that we suddenly got, ah, there it is. There’s the music. There’s the poetry. There’s the blues and the jazz.”

The change in language and the appearance of the elders call upon Harmond and Roosevelt to remember—to remember their roots and where they came from. Elder Joe and Sterling speak in the voice of Ester from the grave.

“Yes, you can be socially mobile, but you have a debt to pay,” Daniel said. “We stand on the shoulders of giants. ... You might be wearing a suit, but how many lives were sacrificed, how much blood was shed for you to get here?”

The dynamic of contrasting language is one of the things that Daniel said makes “Radio Golf” different from others in the cycle. The main characters are empowered in many ways that others in the series were not, but they’ve lost some empowerment by removing themselves from their culture and ethnicity. They are the only ones who don’t live in the Hill District where Wilson set all his other plays.

The encroachment of gentrification and the wiping out of rich histories and cultures in favor of Whole Foods and Starbucks will be reflected in Scenic Designer Sibyl Wickersheimer’s set design. There will be a slow reveal of the office and a rendering of what the main characters want to do with the old neighborhood.

Jeff Gardner’s sound design also takes a layered approach of not just picking music of one era, but seeking out a mix of what might be heard in 1997—current music, the music that Elder Joe would have listened to when he was younger.

“We’re going to mix rather than just having blues or jazz,” Daniel said. “We’re going to mix what those characters’ musical tastes might be. That’s another way of contrasting past and present.”

A Noise Within will also inaugurate a new event, one created by Jeremy O. Harris, the author of “Slave Play.” On Thursday, Oct. 20, the theater will host “Black Out Night.” It is a night designed for people who self-identify as Black to come together and experience a performance in community without having to worry about being under a white gaze. Afterward, there will be a reception allowing people to socialize and discuss what they just experienced.

It’s something Daniel suggested to the theater’s artistic directors and they were eager to do.

“We’re not barring anyone, but those who identify as African American are certainly welcome to come and feel that something special has been created,” Daniel said. “It’s sort of acknowledging the ethnicity, the cultural makeup of this specific group and not having to feel that they’re under a white gaze.”

Daniel said he’s attended several in New York and they have been enormously successful. It’s a form of outreach to people who haven’t always felt at home in the theater, especially if a season simply contained a token Black show and not a real outreach or commitment to universal storytelling.

“It’s a way of saying we want you here, this is part your theater,” Daniel said. “We recognize who you are, we recognize your uniqueness and we want to celebrate this by having a Black Out night.”

While “Radio Golf” is a Black story, it is also a universal story and, Daniel points out, a very American story that is part of a very American series.

“What could possibly be more American than someone who writes about every decade in America of a certain group’s struggles and triumphs?” Daniel asks. “That’s an American story of every immigrant group.”

He hopes people will come immerse themselves in what can be a perfect introduction to Wilson’s Pittsburgh cycle and to leave feeling more hopeful about the choices that lie ahead.

**“Radio Golf” by August Wilson**

**WHERE:** A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Boulevard, Pasadena

**WHEN:** Previews Oct. 16-21, performances Oct. 22-Nov. 13

**COST:** Tickets are \$25 and up, \$18 students

**INFO:** [anoisewithin.org](http://anoisewithin.org)