

**TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER**

## Radio Golf



*Photo by Craig Schwartz*

### **A Noise Within**

When August Wilson's final play *Radio Golf* debuted at Yale Rep in April, 2005 and at our own Mark Taper Forum that August, it was only two months before the master playwright's untimely death from cancer at age 60, an unexpected loss that robbed us all of the many incredible things the man might still have had to say.

The last installment of Wilson's sweeping 10-play American Century Cycle, which covers stories taking place in Pittsburgh's Hill District, each from a different decade from 1904 to 1997, was something unprecedented in American theatre. Each work focuses on major issues confronting African Americans during their particular moment in time and how things evolved through the years—and sadly how things never seem to

change.

The only thing not tragic about Wilson's early departure was that *Radio Golf* did not come to Broadway until 2007 and its author was not around to be disappointed by its original reception. Although it was honored with the New York Drama Critics Award and a nomination for the Best Play Tony, its reviews were generally lackluster and the production closed after only 64 performances.

Today, *Radio Golf* is by no means an anticlimactic ending to Wilson's monumental epic achievement, especially as smartly presented by A Noise Within under the sharply-tuned direction of Wilson-maestro Gregg T. Daniel. Daniel has previously helmed two other plays in the Cycle at ANW, *Gem of the Ocean* and last season's dynamic staging of *Seven Guitars*, as well winning the NAACP Best Director Award in 2016 directing the dramatist's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fences* at the International City Theatre.

Wilson's last chapter of the Hills District saga does not provide a director and design team as eclectic and atmospheric a setting to bring to life as the locations of any of the other nine tales, surely making it a particularly difficult piece to stage of ANW's interesting but oddly-aspected trust stage. Still, Daniels nails it and manages to make *Radio Golf* as facile and kinetic as he did *Seven Guitars*.

His co-creators are equally onboard to make Harmond Wilks' messy campaign office an interesting spot to visit, particularly sound designer Jeff Gardner's classic smooth jazz-tinged score, Mylette Nora's period costuming, and Shen Heckel's prop design. Sibyl Wickensheimer's set is perfect except for the office's main door from which so much action centers, obviously devoid of glass and constructed using such flimsy materials that every time it's opened or closed, the whole wall wobbles and shakes and takes audiences directly out of the magic Daniels and his fine ensemble work to establish.

The cast is uniformly on the money, with Christian Telesmar leading the charge as Wilks, a powerful politician and real estate mogul running for Mayor of Pittsburgh, his campaign centering around a huge mixed-venue redevelopment venture that could greatly improve the profile of the blighted and dilapidated Hill District neighborhood where he—and not-so coincidentally Wilson himself—grew up.

The character of Wilks marks the culmination of Wilson's efforts to indelibly comment on the societal challenges of Black Americans and the unstoppable rise to acceptance for African American culture in our troubled country. Telesmar does an admirable job traveling the character's moral rocky road and making it his own as a man who could become his beloved city's first Black mayor but must first choose between his rise to prominence and his own shaky sense of integrity.

Sydney A. Mason is notable as Mame, Wilks' ambitious wife running his campaign and seeped in political bureaucracy, as is DeJuan Christopher as Roosevelt Hicks, Wilks' equally ambitious business partner. Still, it is Alex Morris and Matt Orduna as the play's two wildcard resident Hill District loners who steal the show.

Morris could not possibly be better as the charmingly off-centered Elder "Old Joe" Barlow, a wizened local character showing up at the office looking for "some Christian people" to fight for his rights. He's a simple guy who doesn't quite get the concept of paying taxes and relinquishing the property he inherited, a dilapidated old last-century house that was sold in default of 12 years back taxes to Wilks and Hicks—and is

located smack-dab in the middle of the firm's Bedford Hills Redevelopment Project.

And as Sterling Johnson, a scrappy neighborhood handyman who champions Barlow and joins the fight not to demolish the former ramshackle old house at 1839 Wylie Avenue in the name of urban development, Orduna is the voice for putting the spin on stopping progress at the expense of decency and working to preserve history.

"You kiss the white man's ass," he snaps at the disrespectful Roosevelt who sees himself the better man, "so they think I gotta kiss their ass too."

There was some early puzzlement of how Wilson's conclusion to his 100-year saga had come to be named *Radio Golf*, aside from the fact that Roosevelt's passion for the sport leads to him becoming the ethnic token face for a Caucasian entrepreneur trying to buy a local radio station at less than market value under the city's minority tax incentive. On first thought, golf hardly surfaces as a major theme in the play, let alone the Cycle. The only link initially could appear to be the fact that Roosevelt hosts a new on-air show called *Radio Golf*, but the inclusion of the sport hardly seems a pivotal theme unless one pays extremely close attention.

The connection, though, is definitely there, subtle as it may be to anyone not willing to ponder the deepest meaning of the play. There couldn't be more waspy and middleclass passion than playing golf, something the denizens of Wilson's earlier plays would never have considered. It is a symbol of the characters' assimilation into a culture that had been previously denied them, something associated with country clubs and Harmond and Mame's upwardly-mobile Ivy-league educations.

The other wonder about this play is how it links back to Wilson's earlier characters. It soon dawns on us that 1839 Wylie Avenue was the majestic home of Aunt Ester, *Gem of the Ocean*'s fiery matriarch who claims to be 287-years-old and spends her life trying to navigate the end of the Civil War and the backlash it created for newly-freed former slaves such as her.

Harmond is the descendant of Caesar Wilks, a character in the same play who as a policeman in their brave new world insists on maintaining the letter of the law at all costs. He is the brother of Black Mary Wilks, the beleaguered housekeeper who falls in love with Citizen Barlow, a young rebel from Alabama who comes to Pittsburgh to be "cleansed" by the spiritual powers of Aunt Ester.

A late scene in *Radio Golf* where Harmond and Old Joe realize they are cousins is not only poignant, but a revealing moment that so completely reinforces everything Wilson had to say about the events of the 20th Century that helped mold who African Americans are today.

Though originally too easily dismissed, *Radio Golf* is indeed the quintessential and a most consummate conclusion to August Wilson's American Century Cycle, the reinforcement for what he had to say about the struggle between history and progress, especially as it applies to the African American experience.

**THROUGH NOV. 13: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena. 626.356.3100 or [anoisewithin.org](http://anoisewithin.org)**