
Shannon presents a very interesting book for all theatergoers, scholars and students who want to get closer and enjoy August Wilson’s theater. The book follows Wilson’s plays chronologically, from \textit{Jitney!} to \textit{Two Trains Running}, and ends with an interview by the author already published in the Winter 1993 issue of \textit{African American Review}, 27 (539-59) as “Blues, History, and Dramaturgy: An interview with August Wilson.” Specifically on this interview and on seven years of own research expands this study of Wilson and his drama.

The structure mirrors the chronology of the plays as Wilson wrote them although his history cycle plays have their own chronology and cover a fictive time span of some seventeen years. Shannon’s study constitutes in-depth analyses of six plays that are components of his self-proclaimed ten-play discourse on African-American historical experience since the 1900’s. She explores the large political, social, and thematic implications while situating each work within its cultural and historical contexts. In addition the study examines how the plays indicate Wilson’s growth as an artist.

Wilson tries to forge new attitudes among Afro-Americans about their past, and the resulting plays “displays a variety of tactics to forge a link between generations separated by a pronounced cultural breakdown.” (p. 3) His main interest lie with the audience’s response to his mythical interpretations of historical moments. For Wilson, the importance of history is a way of knowing the present world and somehow predicting and shaping the future. His own life plays a major role in this study as he sometimes weaves details of his life through his fictitious settings.

The introduction approaches what has shaped August Wilson, as the universal language of the Blues, Baraka’s style of poetic agitprop, and the structure and suspense of Borges. Influenced by the playwrights of the 1960’s Wilson chooses a more down toned version didacticism. He considers himself, as a playwright, to be a part of a larger community of black writers who bear the responsibility of finding ways of sustaining their heritage. Wilson contemplates his drama to be that sustenance “...that which blacks might substitute for the missing stories of their lives.” (p.7) He diverts attention away from the historical details toward the emotional landscape of the African American experience. Never forgetting, and always insisting on proving the linkage to Africa.

In the first chapter, called “In Search of a Voice” Shannon studies August Wilson’s past, personal and professional, explaining how he has become what he is. There is a very interesting examination of his early plays and work. Shannon analyzes plays as \textit{Black Bart and the Sacred Hills}, \textit{Janitor}, or \textit{Fullerton Street}.

Wilson increasingly learned that he needed a realistic dialogue, complex characters, and technical aspects of the craft to successfully writing plays.

The second chapter, “Pittsburgh on His Mind: \textit{Jitney}! Shannon studies this play’s structure and characters, aspects that give us hints of how they later will be developed in his coming plays. We see how Wilson’s talent’s are emerging but have still some problems with the dialogues.

In the following chapters Shannon explores each of Wilson’s plays from \textit{Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom} to \textit{Two Trains Running}. She studies the music that is very important to Wilson, and the different problems he had on his first experience on Broadway.

In “Developing Character: \textit{Fences} “ Shannon studies many points as the male and female roles in Wilson’s plays. She is critical with his female portrayals, finding them, not only in this play, weak. While \textit{Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom} is a tragedy of Blacks that cannot find a piece of their American Dream through music, \textit{Fences} explores the similar effect when the sports arena also rejects them. In addition, this play “explores the chemistry between black men -between fathers and sons, between brothers, and between lifelong friends.” (p 99)

Chapter five: “Finding One’s Own Song: \textit{Joe Turner’s Come and Gone}” is about the cultural fragmentation, the emotional and physical effects associated with cultural upheaval and physical relocation. The first part of this century is a period charged with emotions associated with displacement, alienation, and isolation. Wilson introduces the theme of finding one’s song as healing measure. He does not assign any specific order to this apparent unrelated “list of components, together they create a unified, convincing portrait of what life for blacks were like in post-Reconstructing America.” (p
Wilson has introduced African elements as sacrificial rites, a conjure man, and an exceptional concern for storytelling.

Chapter six, one of the shortest of this book, here Shannon analyzes how August Wilson has increasingly grown his didactic approach through his plays. In his desire to change the climate of their own culture and heritage, Wilson “manipulates various aspects of drama to create potential learning situations” (p 144) argues Shannon. Here again Wilson works with the false glamour of the North that made so many blacks emigrate away from the racist South that limited their aspirations.

In the final chapter before the conclusion: “Going Back to Pick Up the Ball: Two Trains Running.” Shannon examines this static, two-act succession of stories. Stories of Black men and women trying to find their song, and like all of Wilson’s chronicles, it invites the audience to reexamine the black world-view. Anyhow, most outstanding is Wilson ability to force the audience to listen differently and to invoke an atmosphere reminiscent of tribal customs by deliberately emphasizing the stories.

Reaching the conclusion of this book, Shannon outlines Wilson’s “Staying Power” to the Broadway stage, always advocating cultural pride. Wilson de-emphasizes racism, his plays are “black men and women who grapple with themselves within the racist scheme of things.” (p 196).

My own conclusion of this book is that it is highly recommendable for anybody who is interested in approaching this playwright. Shannon studies each play separately but never forgetting the complete vision of August Wilson’s drama. The book is very well structured, touches many points, and interesting anecdotes. There are few notes, which I personally like as it does not break the unity of what one is reading. The book is full of very well reasoned criticism, good comparisons, and an excellent bibliography. All in all, a good start of a long list of coming criticism of this major American playwright. (Elvira Jensen Casado, University of Salamanca)