

August Wilson Revealed Lives as Sagas of Nobility

By BEN BRANTLEY

August Wilson did not sound a thing like Bessie Smith. He didn't, anyway, when I spent an afternoon with him in Pittsburgh 10 years ago, when I was doing an interview for this newspaper.

Essay

His voice was soft, amused, a bit academic, like that of someone enjoying a bustling view from a comfortable distance. Comfortable and distant are not words that come to mind with Smith, whose recordings from the 1930's still thunder with bottomless anger and appetite.

Yet recently, I haven't been able to listen to Smith without hearing Mr. Wilson, too, singing along in a whispery annotation. That day in Pittsburgh, he was elaborating on something he had said before, about how discovering Bessie's recordings had upended and transformed the way he wrote plays. And suddenly, after apologizing that he couldn't "sing a lick," Mr. Wilson was intoning lines from the first Smith recording he owned, when he was a teenager.

"Daddy, I want some diamond rings," he rasped quietly, his eyes bright and conspiratorial. He was leaning over a table at a diner in the Hill District, where Mr. Wilson, who died October 2, grew up and where most of his plays are set, beating time with a coffee spoon on the Formica, making the rhythm ring.

That half-sung, half-spoken phrase and its metallic percussion have been stuck in my mind since I learned that Mr. Wil-



Associated Press

son was diagnosed with terminal liver cancer at 60. For those are the sounds of how one dramatist — a great dramatist — listens. Mr. Wilson was letting me hear something I thought I knew, but with his ears. And after that, with every play by Mr. Wilson I've attended, I've felt as if I could hear him hearing Bessie's blues.

People talk about an artist having an eye. But with playwrights, it's the ear that counts. Mr. Wilson had a peerless pair. His writing comes closer to the sweep of Shakespearean music than that of any of his contemporaries. Only Mr. Wilson has written plays that sound like grand opera — and it is no contradiction to say that it is opera rooted in the blues.

Mr. Wilson's majestic cycle of 10 plays of the African-American journey through the 20th century, each set in a different decade, doesn't just sound operatic. Even though his characters are almost all poor

and socially powerless, their stories bring to minds the gods of Wagner and the doomed royalty of Verdi.

Not everyone in Mr. Wilson's plays is always in touch with his music of illumination. Nor is this music the same for everyone. Mr. Wilson's major characters are all in search of songs that define them both as individuals, as specifically as handwriting, and as parts of a shared history.

In a prefatory note to his masterpiece, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (on Broadway in 1988), set in 1911, Mr. Wilson writes of the African-Americans who have made the exodus from the South to the North: "Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their bags a long line of separation and dispersement" as they "search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy."

August Wilson, who died on October 2, wrote a cycle of 10 plays about the African-American journey through the 20th century.

This describes not only the quest of Mr. Wilson's major characters but also his own emergence as a playwright. Mr. Wilson said — and said so many times that the story has acquired the burnished sheen of myth — that it was discovering vintage blues recordings, as a young man living in a Pittsburgh boarding house, that made him start to listen to the people around him with a new sense of the notes beneath the words. Transforming that perception into fluid theater took Mr. Wilson years.

Mr. Wilson's music buzzes like traded jazz riffs when men argue about subjects as pedestrian as train schedules. It acquires the wistfulness of Puccinian lament when lonely souls recall love. It shifts into subversively antiphonal call and response when fathers and sons quarrel in the voices of their respective generations. And it soars into gospel chorales when characters journey into the historical night of their slave ancestors, as in "Joe Turner" and "Gem of the Ocean."

In such passages, the subliminal movement is from disjointedness and friction into transcendent, seemingly unwitting harmony. And then there are the arias — the monologues of remembered losses and thwarted ambitions that build in Wagnerian crescendos, given reverberant life on Broadway by actors like James Earl Jones (in "Fences") and Delroy Lindo (in "Joe Turner"). Some of these arias end in defeated dying falls; others in moments of epiphany. But in either case, there is triumph in the very music, in the sense of pain and chaos woven, however briefly, into an ecstatic symmetry.