

from the FOOTLIGHTS

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"Life shouldn't be all work and no plays."

<http://www.footlightsdc.org>

Footlights to Discuss August Wilson's *Seven Guitars* September 9

He received two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama, seven New York Drama Critics' Circle awards and a Tony for various of ten plays in his Pittsburgh Cycle, each play set in a different decade of the 20th century. They were done on Broadway and are being done in professional and amateur theaters around the country.

All of this by a man who, apparently, dropped out of high school because of the grinding racism of other boys and educated himself by voracious reading at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, which, for the first and only time, awarded him a high school diploma.

Vincent Canby said of the play's opening on Broadway in 1996, "Here's a play whose epic proportions and abundant spirit remind us of what the American theater once was (before amplified glitz became dominant), and still is when the muses can be heard through the din. Not since Mr. Wilson's own *Two Trains Running* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* has Broadway seemed quite so alive."

As we know from our recent discussion of Wilson's *Piano Lesson* in April, small talk, arguments, passion, joking bring you into the small place on stage where all of this is happening but soon forms a large portrait of the confining world faced by black men and women.

The play opens at a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1948 after the funeral of blues guitarist Floyd Barton. We then see and hear in an extended flashback the bad luck and bad decisions that led to his death. He had just returned to Pittsburgh from a 90-day vagrancy stint in a Chicago jail and learned that a recording he made earlier had become a hit. He needs to get his guitar back from a pawn shop and return to Chicago to sign a recording contract. This is his big chance.

But he wants his old flame, Vera, to go with him back to Chicago. Therein lies pain and hope. He had left her once before; could he be trusted now?

He wants two friends and blues sidemen to go back with him to make new recordings. But they too have questions.

Always, however, there is the blues. "One day you be walking along, and the music jump on you. It just grab hold of you and hang on," a character says as we are treated to a spontaneous jam session. We are also treated to "a saucy dance (in celebration of a victory by the boxer Joe Louis) in which bubbly sensuality turns ominous," a New York

Times reviewer said in the 2006 re-staging of the play.

Here is a list of the plays in the decade they inhabit, and in the parentheses when they were written:

1900s - *Gem of the Ocean* (2003)

1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988)

1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1984) - set in Chicago

1930s - *The Piano Lesson* (1990) - Pulitzer Prize

1940s - *Seven Guitars* (1995)

1950s - *Fences* (1987) - Pulitzer Prize

1960s - *Two Trains Running* (1991)

1970s - *Jitney* (1982)

1980s - *King Hedley II* (1999)

1990s - *Radio Golf* (2005)

When asked once whether there was a thread running through all of them, he replied: "I once wrote a short story called 'The Best Blues Singer in the World' and it went like this: 'The streets that Balboa walked were his own private ocean, and Balboa was drowning.' End of story. That says it all. Nothing else to say. I've been rewriting that same story over and over again. All my plays are rewriting that same story. I'm not sure what it means, other than life is hard."

Our guests for dinner and discussion are **Joshua Morgan**, artistic director of No Rules Theater Company, and **Michele Shay**, the director, who was handpicked by August Wilson for the role of Louise in the Broadway production of *Seven Guitars*, for which she was nominated for the 1996 Tony Award as Best Actress. Jerry Stilkind will moderate.

We will meet at Alfio's, 4515 Willard Avenue, Chevy Chase, MD, on the ground floor of the Willoughby Apartments, a short walk from the north entrance of the Friendship Heights metro stop on the red line. Street parking is limited if you drive, but valet parking is free at Alfio's. Dinner is at 6:30; the discussion begins at 7:30 and ends at 9.

The all-inclusive cost for dinner and discussion is \$20. Dinner is a green salad, choice among six entrées, and spaghetti, green beans, bread and butter, ice cream, and tea or coffee. Alfio's salad bar may be substituted for the entrée if you wish. Cash or check – no credit cards, please. Wine, beer, and cocktails are available from the bar. You may come for the discussion only for just \$5.

Make reservations with Phyllis Bodin, phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768. Reservations and

cancellations will be accepted until noon of the day of the discussion. If you must cancel, please let Phyllis know as soon as possible since the restaurant needs an accurate count. We may be charged for no-shows and would expect you to cover the cost of your meal.

Read *Seven Guitars*. Libraries have many copies of the play. It's for sale at the usual online sites – Amazon, Barnes & Noble, etc. Read the play and join the discussion!

See *Seven Guitars*. No Rules will produce *Seven Guitars* at Signature Theatre from September 10 to 28.

Visible Language in October

How do the deaf learn to communicate? In the late 1800s, as science advanced, it became a topic of great debate – a debate with particular roots in Washington – that Footlights will explore in our October discussion of the world premiere of **Mary Resing's *Visible Language***.

Two schools of thought in teaching the deaf arose, symbolized by the leaders of those two intellectual streams: Alexander Graham Bell and Edward Miner Gallaudet. Yes, the inventor of the telephone first made a name for himself in trying to find ways for the deaf to communicate. And Edward Gallaudet took the whole concept one step further, believing that the deaf, like people with hearing, could

tackle advanced education – at what is now the nation's, and probably the world's, premiere higher education institution for the hearing-impaired, Gallaudet University.

The conflict drew in the first lady of the U.S., Carrie Harrison and, eventually, the most famous of all the deaf students, Helen Keller. Footlights discussed the famous play about Keller and her teacher, Annie Sullivan, *The Miracle Worker*, many years ago.

Now Footlights will discuss these issues in October with guest speakers, playwright **Mary Resing** and **Tom Prewitt**, artistic director of WSC/AvantBard. His theater, along with Gallaudet University, is producing and premiering *Visible Language*. It will be performed at Gallaudet October 21 to November 16.

The date of our dinner-discussion at Alfio's is not quite finalized. Look for further information at [footlightsdc.org](http://www.footlightsdc.org) and in our next newsletter. Phyllis Bodin will take reservations. Mark Gruenberg will moderate our discussion.

About Footlights

To learn more about Footlights, visit our website at <http://www.footlightsdc.org>. To subscribe to our e-list, go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/footlightsdc/join>, or simply e-mail footlightsdc-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

Calendar

- **Tuesday, September 9**, 6:30 p.m. dinner-discussion of *Seven Guitars* by **August Wilson**. **Joshua Morgan**, artistic director of No Rules Theater Company, and **Michele Shay**, the director, are our guests. At Alfio's, 4515 Willard Avenue, Chevy Chase, MD. Dinner including discussion is \$20; discussion only is \$5. Reserve with Phyllis Bodin, phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768.
- **October ?**, 6:30 p.m. dinner-discussion of *Visible Language* by **Mary Resing**. She will be our guest, joined by WSC Avant Bard artistic director **Tom Prewitt**. At Alfio's. Reserve with Phyllis.

Robin Larkin for **FOOTLIGHTS**
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