

# from the FOOTLIGHTS

FEBRUARY 2015

“Life shouldn’t be all work and no plays.” <http://www.footlightsdc.org>

## February 16: Footlights Discussion of August Wilson’s *King Hedley II*

“King Hedley II” is a lofty name for a character who can barely make ends meet, but it follows the tradition of trying to assure some semblance of respect when black men regardless of age were called “Boy” – or worse.

Set in Pittsburgh in the 1980s, the play is steeped in the remnants of “Reaganomics” and “supply-side” policies that promised a trickle of benefits that just didn’t reach huge swatches of America. Hedley seeks to take charge of his destiny and make a better life for himself and his family. His American dream is complicated by his prison record for murder, so with limited opportunities for convicted felons, he takes to selling stolen goods, sure that his scheme will work. An ex-convict on the make for bounty and riches? How delusional is that?

In an interview with August Wilson, Dr. Sandra Shannon notes the playwright’s use of memory, history, mythmaking and the blues in his writings – Wilson brings all of these elements into the *Hedley* script. The play is described as a “stirring and ferocious exploration of fate, honor and the daily struggles of American life” filled with operatic-like monologues that steep the characters in rich cultural traditions.

In other Wilson scripts, characters’ scars are hidden and tucked away, revealed dramatically and uncovering hidden trauma. Hedley’s scar prominently runs down his face and cheek, thrusting an ominous in-your-face element of imminent danger, survival, and capacity for healing, but with a rough scarred finish. Though loud, brash and reckless, throughout the show Hedley valiantly tends to a bare-boned flower garden trying desperately to get something to sprout – is that a nod to his capacity to care and nurture?

Ninth by decade (eighth written) in August Wilson’s ten-play cycle, *King Hedley II* contains several characters introduced in previous pieces produced here in the Metro region, most recently, *Seven Guitars* that Footlights discussed in September. In that play, a spry young Ruby was devastated and pregnant with Hedley when her lover is murdered. Positioned forty years from that finale, with Ruby still around having her say, the *King Hedley II* script shimmers with hope despite pervasive hardship and loss. In this tenth year of Wilson’s untimely death at 60 years-old, we will explore his legacy that continues to

thrill us with possibilities while haunting us with inescapable reflections of cultural history.

Please join us on **Monday, February 16**. Our guests are Dr. **Sandra Shannon** and **Jessica Frances Dukes**. Dr. Shannon is a Full Professor of African American Literature, specializing in Dramatic Literature and Criticism at Howard University. She is one of the nation’s leading scholars on the life and works of Pulitzer Prize winning playwright August Wilson. She is also Founder of the interdisciplinary-focused August Wilson Society at Howard University.

Actress Jessica Frances Dukes will play Tonya in Arena Stage’s upcoming production of *Hedley*. Ms. Dukes was most recently seen in *Bootycandy* Off Broadway at Playwrights Horizons and in *A Raisin In The Sun Revisited* (a documentary on the Raisin Cycle at Baltimore’s Center Stage – previously aired on PBS, now on PBS.org. Debbie Jackson will moderate our discussion.

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. (Note: if you know you must leave before 9, please be sure to sit near the door, so you can exit quietly!)

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](mailto: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 the script.** Copies of *King Hedley II* may be found in local libraries, bookstores and online sources – Amazon, Barnes & Noble, etc.

Arena Stage is producing *King Hedley II* February 6 – March 8.

**Note:** On Friday, February 20, PBS will air the August Wilson documentary, *The Ground on Which I Stand*. <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/episodes/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand/about-the-film/3610/>

### ***Uncle—Vanya Life Sucks (or the Present Ridiculous)***

Aaron Posner's *Life Sucks* – at Theater J through February 15 – is loosely based on Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*. It is only one of the *Vanya*-influenced plays coming to the Metro area early in 2015. Footlights discussed this Chekhov explosion in December 2014 with guest Nelson Pressley. Theater J has offered us a discount price of \$35 for the remaining Sunday matinees. There are postshow discussions each Sunday at 5 p.m. – [washingtondcjjcc.org/center-for-arts/theater-j/on-stage/beyond-the-stage.html](http://washingtondcjjcc.org/center-for-arts/theater-j/on-stage/beyond-the-stage.html). Use the code FOOTLIGHTS when you buy your tickets.

### **Calendar**

- **Monday, February 16**, 6:30 p.m. dinner-discussion of August Wilson's *King Hedley II* with Dr. **Sandra Shannon**, Howard University Professor of African American Literature and actress **Jessica Frances Dukes**, appearing as Tonya in Arena Stages' production of *Hedley*. 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](mailto:phylbo@verizon.net) or 301-986-1768.
- **Wednesday, March 25**, 6:30 p.m. dinner-discussion of *The Originalist* by John Strand. At Alfio's. Reserve with Phyllis.

Robin Larkin for **FOOTLIGHTS**  
5800 Nicholson Lane, Apt. L-07  
Rockville, MD 20852

### **March 25: Footlights Dinner-discussion of *The Originalist***

Also mark your calendars for **Wednesday, March 25** for our dinner-discussion of *The Originalist* by John Strand. Peter Marks' preview description: "Based in part on Justice Scalia's written opinions, the play will pit the justice in intellectual duels with a young and fictionalized Harvard-trained law clerk of more liberal leanings. Act 2 will focus heavily on the Supreme Court's decision last year to strike down a key part of the controversial Defense of Marriage Act."

### **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](mailto:footlightsdc-subscribe@yahoogroups.com).