

The Writer's Landscape



Innovative exhibition showcases the life of the famed playwright August Wilson and the Black experience at the Pittsburgh cultural center that bears his name.

By Tim Grant

The visitor steps into the “Coffee Shop,” an old-school neighborhood diner from the 1960s. There’s a jukebox in the corner, salt and pepper shakers and ash trays on the counters, and booths and chairs dressed in faux-leather upholstery. It’s a re-creation of the kind of place where Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson often spent long hours sitting, watching people, making the notes that would create the unforgettable characters in his plays.

On display are handwritten notes, newspaper clippings, and even a cup of coffee in a nearby booth as if Mr. Wilson just stepped away.

But just like the jukebox, every detail of the diner is layered with meaning and significance. The coffee shop not only helps tell the story of Mr. Wilson, but also helps tell the larger story of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the 1960s, and the Black experience amid Jim Crow segregation and racial injustice.

The coffee shop is the first exhibit that is part of “August Wilson: The Writers Landscape,” a pioneering, interactive exhibit that features many personal items that belonged to the author.

In “The Office,” the most prominent feature is a high, pine accounting desk, where Mr. Wilson wrote standing up. On this desk several images are projected: an old record album, a photo of a Negro League baseball team. By waving your hand over several projected images on the desk, the visitor can begin a video that covers the creative and political influences that shaped Mr. Wilson’s consciousness.

In “The Writer’s Landscape,” the writing world of playwright August Wilson comes to life inside a full display for all 10 of his Century Cycle plays that chronicle each decade of the 20th century for Black Americans. The Century Cycle is considered Wilson’s greatest contribution to American theater, and the recently opened exhibit is at the Pittsburgh cultural center that bears his name.

“The purpose of the exhibit is to emphasize August Wilson as a writer and a historian and to give the historical backstory on writing the plays and connecting them to what was happening in American history at the time that the plays were set and when he was writing his plays,” said Janis Burley Wilson, president and CEO at August Wilson African American Cultural Center.

The installation opened after a long time coming in August 2022, and is the only tribute of its kind to the celebrated Pittsburgh native who died in Seattle in 2005. It will remain on permanent display and free to the public at the cultural center located in Downtown Pittsburgh.

This perpetual tribute to the great author’s life and work is the heart and soul of the events center, which exists to tell his story and provide programs that focus exclusively on the African American experience, as well as showcase art and culture from the African diaspora.

Although the center itself opened with great fanfare in 2009, the original founders struggled with debt from the onset because of massive construction cost overruns and ultimately filed bankruptcy in 2014. An entirely different organization runs it today thanks to the Pittsburgh and Richard King Mellon foundations and The Heinz Endowments funding \$7 million to purchase the shuttered building in 2017 and setting up the African American Cultural Center to oversee its reopening.

“We’re keeping true to the original mission. But we’ve changed the mission somewhat because the times we are living in are different,” Ms. Burley Wilson said. “We are an African American cultural center, but Africans are all over the world. So, connecting to the diaspora is really important to understanding where Black people come from, why we create those things we create and where our influences come from.”

A recent \$1 million grant from The Heinz Endowments and the Ford Foundation through the Pittsburgh’s Cultural Treasures Initiative, Ms. Burley Wilson said, gives the center a “financial safety net” to remain a home for arts, storytelling and the exchange of ideas related to the African American experience, something the center has done since its founding. This kind of “security,” she said, is especially important because being named after the literary giant August Wilson has raised the building’s profile on the national and international stage, attracting artists from around the world.

Its 492-seat auditorium has recently welcomed performances from a dance company from Haiti and singing groups from Africa, Cuba and Puerto Rico, including Eddie Palmieri, a Grammy Award-winning bandleader of Puerto Rican ancestry. He opened his performance at the August Wilson Center by telling the audience that his music comes from Africa, and that Salsa music and Latin music are based in the drums from Africa.

“He says that before he even starts to play in order to make that connection,” Ms. Burley Wilson said. “That’s important, especially for young people to understand that they’re not confined just to their neighborhood. They are connected to people all over the globe.

“We have the ability to tell that story and make that connection for people,” she said. “When people realize they are connected and they are global, they can do anything. They can go anywhere. They aren’t confined to their street or their house. They can dream bigger when they know they are connected to people around the world.”

While August Wilson’s contribution to writing and theater are acknowledged at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, the permanent exhibit in Pittsburgh is the first and largest of its kind — covering nearly 4,000 square feet.

Ms. Burley Wilson [who is not related to the author] collaborated with the writer’s widow Constanzo Romero Wilson, who is executor of the August Wilson estate, to obtain personal items such as his books and music. The University of Pittsburgh also provided materials to the exhibit from its archives.

The Writer’s Landscape was designed by museum curator Victoria Edwards of Eisterhold Associates, a Kansas City, Missouri, firm whose work includes the Rosa Parks Museum in Alabama and the Gordon Parks Museum in Kansas. But sadly, Ms. Edwards didn’t get to see the August Wilson exhibit open. The 31-year-old woman had been working on the project for two and a half years when she died from COVID-19 in December 2021.

The August Wilson Center created a small gallery dedicated to her memory called the Victoria Gallery.

“Victoria was the youngest Black woman with a museum designer on that scale. This was her big project, and her last, because she passed away,” Ms. Burley Wilson said. “She designed the exhibit, selected everything from the photographs to the video, working with the actors who did the narration on the video, the theater prop research. When you walk through the exhibit, you’ll understand why her contribution was so significant.”

Ms. Burley Wilson is the former vice president of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust and had worked there for 15 years. When she stepped into the role of president and CEO of the August Wilson Center in September 2017, it was a continuation of the work she had done programming events at the center on an interim basis when the three foundations acquired the building in a sheriff’s sale in 2014.

The Penn Hills native graduated from the University of Pittsburgh in 1987 with a bachelor's degree in rhetoric and communications, and Hispanic language and culture with aspirations of being a newscaster on Spanish television. After an internship with Family Communications at WQED, she went back to Pitt for a master's degree in elementary education.

She worked for Pittsburgh Public Schools as an elementary and middle school teacher for several years. She was at American University in Washington, D.C., studying for a Ph.D. in education administration in 2002 when the opportunity came up to move back to Pittsburgh and work for the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust.

“I learned from my time working at the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust that you don't spend \$5 million when you only have \$2 million and then you're in trouble and have to go ask for help,” she said.

J. Kevin McMahon, president and CEO of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust since 2001, said he and Ms. Burley Wilson started working at the organization around the same time, and it was bittersweet to see her leave for the August Wilson Center.

“Part of what the Cultural Trust has been trying to do since it was founded was to make sure there was something in the cultural district for everyone, and the August Wilson African American Cultural Center is helping that to occur,” Mr. McMahon said. “The fact that they are doing good work on their stage as well as in their galleries and educational programs is adding to the overall experience of the cultural district.”

The August Wilson center currently has a staff of 21 people and an annual budget of \$6 million. About 17% of the budget comes from earned revenue, such as ticket sales and venue rental income. The local foundation community has provided substantial financial support, but national organizations such as the Ford Foundation have also begun to support work at the center.

Ms. Burley Wilson plans to expand the August Wilson Center's rental and catering revenue with the addition of a catering and demonstration kitchen with funds received from the Regional Asset District (RAD), the Hillman Foundation and some assistance from the state.

The center recently acquired a sculpture installation by Nigerian artist Peju Alatise called “Flying Girls,” which debuted at the Venice Biennale in 2017. The August Wilson Center featured it for the first time in 2018.

“In 2021, we acquired that installation, and we're going to remount it,” Ms. Burley Wilson said. We commissioned a video and accompanying film that will eventually all tour together to other institutions. This installation. It's stunning.”

Part of the mission of the August Wilson African American Cultural Center is wanting the visitor, especially Black visitors, to connect to the exhibitions, to see themselves and their families as part of the local and the larger African diaspora.

For many, that can begin when they take the first step into “August Wilson: The Writer’s Landscape,” where themes of Black leadership, redemption, and survival flow throughout the exhibition as they continue to flow across the global Black experience.

When people come, said Ms. Burley Wilson, “we want it to be a personal experience and August Wilson helps open the door to that.”

Tim Grant is a writer living in Pittsburgh.