Contemporary Playwrights: August Wilson
Friday, February 23, 2001
Grades 7 – 12

Background Information

The Playwright

August Wilson is one of America’s most significant and successful living playwrights. Less than 20 years ago, he began an ambitious playwriting project: to chronicle the central issues Africa Americans have faced by writing one play for each decade of the 20th century. Each play’s focus is on what Wilson perceived was the biggest issue of that decade. For example, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, set in 1927, examines the white exploitation of black musical talents and black-on-black violence and crime. Wilson’s play for the 1930s, The Piano Lesson, explores the complexity of emotions about the legacy of slavery revolving around an heirloom piano artistically carved with images of a family’s painful history. The characters in Seven Guitars include several 1940s blues musicians whose experiences suggest the differences between what the blues mean to blacks and to whites. Fences, set in the 1950s, deals with an illiterate garbage collector who understands that poverty and racism denied him the baseball career he deserved. His dissatisfaction with life leads him to put up “fences” between him and those he loves most. Wilson has won every honor for theater that the United States offers, including a Tony Award (Fences) and several New York Drama Critics Circle Awards. Two of his plays (Fences and The Piano Lesson) have been honored with the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, a prestigious award that recognized these works for their power and educational value. Like his other dramatic works, their educational value lies largely in their accurate portrayal of the black experience in America. Wilson believes that the theater is a powerful medium for delivering his messages and for empowering his race. He continues to use his dramatic talents to make important political statements that articulate his vision of African-American history in the last century.

The Play

King Hedley II marks the eighth of ten plays in the 20th century cycle that Wilson will ultimately create. Like all but one of his dramas, its setting is a black lower-class district of his native Pittsburgh. The year is 1985. This play takes place four decades after his Seven Guitars and extends plot elements and characters established in that drama.
In Seven Guitars, Ruby names her son after her dying lover, King Hedley. *King Hedley II*’s title character, therefore, is that child grown into a man.

The characters deal daily with violence, death, and economic helplessness. In lengthy monologues, each character explains how the past has influenced the present, the result being a deeper insight into what drives them forward and what keeps them down. The consequence of Hedley’s search for his own identity is a series of angry, futile, and misguided attempts to build a better life in a world in which “it’s harder to work than it is to steal.”

### About the Program

August Wilson will discuss his playwriting project and the current production of *King Hedley II*. He will also show video clips of scenes from the production and will show how the characters, themes, and issues in *King Hedley II* relate to his other plays. Discussion topics will include rehearsing, performing, and touring a play. Caleen Sinnette Jennings, Professor of Theater at American University, will moderate the discussion.

Write a brief character description for each character in your play.

A monologue is a speech spoken by one person. The characters in *King Hedley II* reveal information about themselves through monologues you identified above. What information might this character give the audience in a monologue? Try thinking and working like a playwright and write one monologue.

### Instructional Activity

**Characters and Monologues**

The setting for *King Hedley II* remains the same throughout the play. It is a backyard. The six characters are family members, neighbors, and friends who visit. If you wrote a play set in your neighborhood or backyard, who might the six characters be?