



**Lights Up! Library
Classroom Activities**

Jitney

By August Wilson

Directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson



INTRODUCTION

Thank you for bringing Manhattan Theatre Club's Lights Up! Library initiative into your high school classroom! We're thrilled to provide to you and your students these classroom activities and the performing recording of *Jitney* by August Wilson.

Our goals for this initiative are:

- To help students better understand themselves and the world through the medium of theatre
- To help develop a knowledgeable, perceptive new audience for the theatre and for the arts in general
- To stimulate participants' imaginations, creativity, and critical thinking skills through engagement with challenging theatre works

The activities are divided into three sections:

- **Preparing Students to View the Play** — activities may include classroom discussion prompts, writing prompts, and theatre games or improvisations
- **Viewing the Play** — including questions for classroom discussion after students watch the performance
- **Follow-Up Activities** — further activities intended to deepen students' personal and intellectual interactions with the play

Additionally, [click here](#) to access supplemental resources which may include links to articles and videos meant to bring further context to this experience.

Our hope is that you will have the time to activate all of the activities in this document; however, we understand that time is among the scarcest resources in a high school classroom. One could maintain a rich experience by engaging in the framing questions, one preparatory activity, post-show questions, and one follow-up exercise. And, of course, please modify these activities — or devise your own — in any way necessary to meet the needs of each student in your classroom.

Some of the activities you'll find on these pages align to the [National Core Arts Standards for Theatre](#), and most will align to your local benchmarks and standards.

We hope that this experience will be enriching and educationally beneficial to your students!



ABOUT MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

Over the past five decades, Manhattan Theatre Club has been a preeminent producer of the highest quality, award-winning theatrical productions of new works by American and international playwrights. Our over 600 premieres have been produced throughout the country and across the globe and have contributed a proud legacy to the American theatrical canon.

Our artistic mission, which Artistic Director Lynne Meadow created and has implemented since 1972, is to develop and present new work in a dynamic, supportive, environment; to identify and collaborate with the most promising new as well as seasoned, accomplished artists; and to produce a diverse repertoire of innovative, entertaining, and thought-provoking plays and musicals by American and international playwrights in our theatres each season. Our commitment to excellence extends to every aspect of the company: from the gifted permanent staff; to a supportive Board of Directors; to a first-rate Education program, which has served more than 100,000 students of all ages in New York City, across the country, and around the world; to a quality, paid career training program, which prepares the next generation of theatre professionals for jobs at MTC and beyond; to a robust behind-the-scenes developmental program for new work. MTC performs in multiple venues: our Broadway home at the 650-seat Samuel J. Friedman Theatre—formerly Biltmore Theatre—which we restored and reopened in 2003, and at New York City Center off-Broadway, where we created a 300-seat Stage I and a 150-seat Stage II.

MTC productions have earned 7 Pulitzer Prizes, 30 Tony Awards, 51 Drama Desk Awards, and 49 Obie Awards, amongst many other honors, but our success is not measured by awards. Instead, the merit of our work is represented by the output and talent of the myriad of writers and artists who have debuted at MTC and who continue to return for multiple productions. We are proud of the artists whom we have discovered and nurtured, as well as their impact on our industry.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Manhattan Theatre Club's Broadway premiere production of August Wilson's *Jitney* opened at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre on January 19, 2017. It was directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, and the cast included Harvy Blanks, Anthony Chisholm, Brandon J. Dirden, André Holland, Carra Patterson, Michael Potts, Keith Randolph Smith, Ray Anthony Thomas, and John Douglas Thompson. The set was designed by David Gallo, costumes by Toni-Leslie James, lighting by Jane Cox, and sound by Darron L. West. The original music was by Bill Sims, Jr.

ABOUT AUGUST WILSON AND *JITNEY*



August Wilson is the towering figure in African American dramatic literature and indeed one of the most important playwrights in American theatre history. His monumental *Pittsburgh Cycle*—10 plays about the African-American experience, each set in a different decade of the 20th century—remains remarkable both for its ambition and for its achievement. Six of the 10 plays in the cycle won major awards, including two Pulitzer Prizes and a Tony. Wilson claims to have been influenced by the “four B’s”— blues music, the artist Romare Beardon, the Argentine fiction writer Jorge Luis Borges, and the African-American playwright Amiri Baraka. (He later added novelist James Baldwin and playwright Ed Bullins to the list.)

Wilson’s plays tend to be group portraits, rich depictions of the crosscurrents, tensions, and conflicts that affect and afflict the residents of Pittsburgh’s Hill District at varying moments during the 20th century. At the same time, an array of vivid, idiosyncratic, memorable individual characters emerge from within these groups—the irrepressible Ma Rainey (*Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*), the embittered, disappointed, but doggedly principled Troy Maxson (*Fences*), and the prophesying Stool Pigeon (*King Hedley II*), to name just a few.

Though grounded in realism, his plays can move towards the mystical (e.g., the self-playing piano in *The Piano Lesson*), the surreal (e.g., the ageless Aunt Ester who appears in several of his plays), and the lyrical. Wilson initially intended to be a poet, and his plays frequently contain long passages of heightened language. As noted, he was deeply influenced by the blues, and his characters’ speeches sometimes seem like musical numbers, employing vivid imagery and featuring repetitions of words and phrases.

His plays are far less overtly political than those of many of his African-American peers, including his acknowledged influencer Amiri Baraka. But they are all informed by the Black experience in White America. The white man is always just offstage, sometimes intentionally, sometimes inadvertently pushing and pulling social and economic strings to the detriment of the Black community and the individuals it comprises.

Against that background, Wilson's characters strive to achieve, to realize their individual dreams and ambitions, even while acknowledging and sustaining their powerful ties to their families, neighbors, and communities. They often lift their heads above the daily reality of earning a day's pay to take the broad and long view. No matter how difficult their immediate situations, Wilson and his characters remain aware of the importance of spiritual and social legacies, the power of shared values and experiences, and the possibility of a better future.

Nowhere is this truer than in *Jitney*, one of Wilson's earliest-written plays, though not the first to be produced. Set in 1977 in a gypsy cab station in Pittsburgh's Hill District, *Jitney* is a compassionate, often humorous portrait of nine individuals, most of them shadowed by secrets, sorrows, and troubled histories that inform their Wilsonian struggle to make a living and a life. Throughout the play, long-simmering tensions erupt into confrontations between friends, co-workers, lovers, and family members—most painfully between the station's proprietor, Jim Becker, and his son Booster, who has just returned after 20 years in prison. And hovering over the whole enterprise is the threat of imminent eviction by the forces of urban renewal.

The social groupings of *Jitney* can be visualized as concentric circles. At the center are the individual characters with their disparate backstories and life attitudes. In the next circle are the interpersonal relationships between pairs of characters, most notably between the young lovers, Rena and Youngblood, the father/son pairing of Becker and Booster, and to some extent between Turnbo and Youngblood, whose long-simmering animosity erupts into near violence, their enmity perhaps rooted in Turnbo's jealousy of Youngblood's relationship with Rena. Then there is the intra-group dynamic, the ebb and flow of alliance and hostility, of interdependence and resentment, of friendship and rivalry that characterizes the daily life of the jitney station. Next is the interconnection of the jitney station with the surrounding community: Outside the door and at the other end of the always-ringing telephone are an array of offstage characters, the drivers' customers, their relatives (mostly wives and mothers), the neighborhood retailers, and finally—but significantly—the mostly white authorities, politicians, and businessmen whose plans and policies profoundly affect the destinies of the drivers and their dependents. Indeed, as noted above, surrounding the play's entire action is White America, the contemporaneous and historical context for this play. Finally, it is the effort of Wilson's characters to endure and prevail, to transcend a legacy of racism, oppression, and discrimination that animates *Jitney*, as it does all his plays.

Extended New York Times article about August Wilson:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2003/02/02/theater/theater-the-mother-of-an-era-august-wilson-s.html>

CHARACTERS, SETTING, AND TIME

YOUNGBLOOD, jitney driver and Vietnam veteran—mid-late twenties

TURNBO, jitney driver who is always interested in the business of others

FIELDING, jitney driver and former tailor, with a dependency on alcohol

DOUB, longtime jitney driver and Korean War veteran

SHEALY, numbers taker who often uses the jitney station as his base

PHILMORE, local hotel doorman, recurring jitney passenger

BECKER, well-respected man who runs the jitney station—in his sixties

BOOSTER, Becker's son, recently released from prison—in his early forties

RENA, Youngblood's girlfriend and mother of their young son

SETTING:

A gypsy cab station in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

TIME:

Early fall, 1977.



PREPARING STUDENTS TO VIEW THE PLAY

FRAMING QUESTIONS

Either through classroom discussion or individual journaling, ask students to reflect upon these questions:

- Have you ever mistrusted someone you loved? Was your mistrust unfounded or was it confirmed? What happened?
- Have you ever been so blinded by rage that you did something you came to regret? Do you know anyone who has done this? What were the circumstances?
- Have you been part of a group under severe threat—an organization, a team, a club? Do you know anyone who has? What was the nature of the threat? What happened?

WRITING ACTIVITY: BIG AND SMALL

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Cn10.1-1.a.

Ask the students to write a poem or free-write in response to the prompts:

- “A Time I was Big” (assign to half the class)
- “A Time I was Small” (assign to half the class)

Ask students to share their responses to the extent they are comfortable doing so.

IMPROVISATION ACTIVITY: GROUP WITH A PURPOSE

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Cr1.1-III.c., TH:Cr2-II.b., TH:Cr3.1-I.a., TH:Cr3.1-I.b., TH:Pr4.1-I.a., TH:Pr4.1-I.b., TH:Pr4.1-II.a., TH:Pr5.1-I.a., TH:Re7.1-I.a., TH:Re8.1-II.a.

A. Defining the Group

The class makes a big list of formal and informal gatherings of individuals that exist for a common purpose or in response to a shared need. Think of groups you belong to, know about, or can imagine. Start close to home: Think of groups that you or people you know care about deeply. Through some kind of democratic selection process, the class settles on one group.

Consider:

Which groups mean the most to most of the class?

Which groups do you know a lot about? To which groups do you feel deep emotional attachments? Which would you miss the most if they disappeared?

(Again, these answers can be drawn from real life or created from imagination.)

B. The Group Members

Identity and differentiate individual members of the selected group. Group members often fall into archetypes.

Once the class has compiled its list of types, write each on an index card.

C. Day in the Life of the Group

Create a “Day in the Life of the Group” improvisation by asking for five or six volunteers, each of whom draws one of the cards. The class and the volunteers quickly agree on a setting—where does the group normally meet or hang out?—and set it up using simple classroom furniture (mostly chairs). (Examples: For a chorus or choir, maybe place chairs in a semicircle; for a sports team, place them in a few rows to indicate benches in a locker room.)

One by one the players enter the space and interact with the others, depicting a typical day in the group’s life. (For example, for a chorus they could be discussing selections for the next concert; for a team, reviewing strategy, discussing upcoming opponents, or rehashing last week’s game.) The task for the players is to make clear what their character type is based on the card they’ve drawn. Allow the scene to continue for a few minutes, until all the characters have been heard from.

The students then discuss what they’ve observed and what they think was on each player’s card. Have them give evidence for their inferences. Discuss how the interaction of the disparate life energies gave life and energy to the scenes.

VIEWING THE PLAY

You’ll receive a link and password to the performance recording of the play on the first weekday of the month for which you registered to view the play. The recording may be viewed only during regularly scheduled class time in classrooms or assembly spaces on your campus. Viewing credentials may not be shared with students for individual viewing at home or on social media.



You may wish to assign each student to “track” a character during the performance using a [Character Profile Form](#).

CLASS DISCUSSION

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1-I.a., TH:Re8.1-I.c., TH:Re9.1-I.b., TH:Re9.1-I.c.

After viewing the play, use these questions to facilitate a class discussion about the theatergoing experience:

- What moments in the production were particularly vivid and powerful?
- What was surprising?
- What was confusing to you?
- What were the pivotal moments?
- Who of the characters seemed most sympathetic? Why?
- Which characters were less admirable? Did they have redeeming qualities that helped you understand their behavior?
- Why do you think the playwright wrote this play?
- Do you think the jitney station will survive? What will happen?
- What do you think will become of Youngblood and Rena’s relationship?

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

MONOLOGUE WRITING: SELF AND COMMUNITY

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Cr1.1-III.c., TH:Pr4.1-I.a., TH:Pr4.1-II.a., TH:Re8.1-III.b., TH:Cn11.1-I.a.

Ask students to write two monologues in response to the prompts:

- “At Your Service”
- “My Business/Your Business”

Ask students to share their monologues to the extent they are comfortable doing so.

DRAWING CONNECTIONS

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1-III.a., TH:Re8.1-I.b., TH:Re8.1-II.b., TH:Re8.1-III.b., TH:Re9.1-III.c., TH:Cn10.1-I.a., TH:Cn11.1-I.a.; TH:Cn11.2-I.b.

How does this play connect to the world around us?



Individually or in small groups, ask students to find an article, news feature, interview, or other recent artifact from current events that reflects one of the play's themes or ideas. Then, have students share and discuss:

- Why is this theme or idea relevant today?
- Have they encountered the theme or idea in other artistic mediums or media?
- Does this new information alter your personal response to the production? If so, how?

What did we discover?

Ask each student to identify a topic in the play with which they were previously unfamiliar. The student should gather as much information as they can on this subject and share with the class. Sources could include articles, news features, videos, interviews, or other relevant artifacts. Guide students through the compilation of research and the structure of the sharing as best appropriate for your subject area and curricular goals.

FEEDBACK FOR MTC

We appreciate that you chose to bring Manhattan Theatre Club's production of *Jitney* into your classroom, and we hope that your students had a great experience with these activities and the play.

You'll receive an email at the end of the month in which your class had access to the performance recording. Please complete the Lights Up! Library Feedback Form linked in that email so that we can continue to improve this initiative.