



“For Historical and Literary Perspective”: Wilson Scholar and AWS President Dr. Sandra G. Shannon Plays Key Role in August Wilson: The Writers Landscape

Hats off to the team of visionaries who convened in 2019 to conceptualize and set in motion plans for an ageless tribute to the life and work of Pittsburgh’s, America’s, and the world’s playwright: August Wilson. Despite having to contend with a global pandemic that would eventually upend the project’s initial timeline, that initial meeting has now yielded a sprawling “3,600-square-foot gallery space that features interactive, multi-sensory exhibits, artifacts from Wilson’s Estate, and recreations of ephemera from the 1900s to early 2000s.” The appropriately named permanent exhibit, August Wilson: The Writer’s Landscape, provides a panoramic view of the people, places, and things that informed the celebrated playwright’s creative process. Billed as “the first-ever immersive exhibition dedicated to the life and works of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson,” this expansive exhibit is set to open on April 15, 2022, at Pittsburgh’s August Wilson African American Cultural Center (AWAACC).

In August 2018, AWAACC President and CEO Janis Burley Wilson reached out to me in an email inviting me to consider serving as a Consultant on this ambitious project—a role that landed me on a select team that includes Constanza Romero Wilson, August Wilson’s widow, Executor of August Wilson Legacy, LLC and the exhibit’s chief curator; Gerard “Jerry” Eisterhold, founder, president, principal designer and creative director of Eisterhold Associates, Inc., whose work includes the Rosa Parks Museum in Alabama, the Harry S. Truman Presidential Library & Museum in Missouri, and the African American Museum in Philadelphia; acclaimed scenic designers David Gallo and Viveca Gardiner; and noted filmmaker Emmi



Alaquiva. It did not take long for this team of experts to gel and form a formidable community working toward the common goal of memorializing August Wilson in “epic” fashion and doing justice to his “epic” legacy. Although we drew from different wells of knowledge and experience, we were equally invested in the mission of August Wilson: The Writer’s Landscape.

“I’d like to talk to you about a project we are working on at the Center,” Burley-Wilson wrote. “We are working with a tech firm on a digital installation about August Wilson. For historical and literary perspective, I’d like to hire you as a consultant on the project. Are you interested? Let’s talk soon, Janis.” I am honored that my credentials as the nation’s leading scholar on August Wilson combined with my proven expertise in African American literature, Black Theater, and my distinguished record of groundbreaking scholarship on the work of August Wilson¹ worked in my favor to become AWAACC Scholar in Residence and project Consultant for this bustling state of the art cultural center in the heart of Pittsburgh that proudly bears Wilson’s name. I wasted little time in responding to Burley Wilson’s invitation with an emphatic Yes! In the weeks, months, and years that followed, I welcomed the various demands of this role that sometimes required three, four, or up to six-hour zoom sessions to review and approve content and that called for significant blocks of time to edit, re-edit, and critique recordings, drawings, costumes, props, written texts, etc., all in our unending quest for absolute accuracy.

As the project’s content specialist, I drew heavily upon my years of research, teaching, reading, and writing about Wilson, the playwright, and the man. As such, I was comfortable crafting succinct plot summaries of each of his American Century Cycle plays, offering relevant



historical and cultural context on black life in 20th century America, and identifying major themes that emerge in each of the plays’ ten decades. My work also entailed critiquing the exhibit’s design and layout with visitors’ needs in mind, doing voiceover recordings of select excerpts from my 1990 interview with Wilson as part of the culminating *How I Learned What I Learned* portion of the exhibit, and offering feedback on original artwork—most notably, on the hauntingly beautiful rendition of *Gem of the Ocean’s* The City of Bones done by the late Eisterhold Associates design specialist Victoria Edwards. In addition to all the above ways I worked to bring forth August Wilson: The Writer’s Landscape exhibit, I suggested language for both “street scripts” and “office scripts,” identified touchstone lines or particularly resonating dialogue to be highlighted in the exhibit and offered supplemental readings or helpful links.²

I feel particularly fortunate to have played such a key role in bringing this historic project to fruition. Being a part of this venture has not only introduced me to an amazing team of professionals, but it has also given me a front row seat to the fascinating process of reconstructing August Wilson’s writing landscape. Being in this mix has also shown me the absolute value that dedicated and sustained scholarship has in documenting and preserving the work of literary giants such as August Wilson. At your earliest opportunity, I encourage all to take a deep dive into the inspiring educational exhibit August Wilson: The Writer’s Landscape!

¹ See <https://works.bepress.com/sandra-shannon/>

² For example, I shared an excellent source on the work of Jorge Luis Borges to enhance our understanding of the techniques in his writing: Edwin Williamson’s *The Cambridge Companion to Jorge Luis Borges*, edited by Edwin Williamson.
<https://www.amazon.com/Cambridge-Companion-Borges-Companions->



Literature/dp/0521141370/ref=sr_1_1?crid=1665BGDG5VP3O&dchild=1&keywords=the+cambridge+companion+to+jorge+luis+borges&qid=1594137140&srefix=cambridge+companion+to+jorg%2Caps%2C142&sr=8-1

I also suggested that my colleagues read my essay on Lloyd Richards in *The Great North American Stage Directors* (Methuen 2021), 178-207.