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Author(s): Sandra G. Shannon

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FROM LORRAINE HANSBERRY TO AUGUST WILSON
An Interview with Lloyd Richards

By Sandra G. Shannon

I arrived on the campus of Yale University in early August, 1990, a time when the air was not yet filled with diverse sounds of energetic co-eds or the smell of imminent autumn. A friendly staff welcomed me to Dean Lloyd Richards's York Street office, where two mounted prints of Eugene O'Neill adorned the walls above the Dean's crowded bookshelves. Instead of the familiar unread scripts one might expect to see atop a director's desk, Dean Richards's desktop held a menagerie of photos—of family members and of what appeared to be an impressive group of friends. Somewhere within the several rows of neatly framed snapshots stood a picture of August Wilson.

During his extremely productive career, Lloyd Richards has counseled a host of theatrical associates who are now celebrities—for example, Sidney Poitier, Lorraine Hansberry, Charles Dutton, Wole Soyinka, Athol Fugard, and August Wilson. Many theater-goers continue to remember Lloyd Richards for having directed Hansberry's Broadway drama, A Raisin in the Sun (1959), *which interested audiences nationwide and gave many white Americans their first realistic view of African-American domestic life. As a result of his tireless work as artistic director of both Yale Repertory and the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut; as Dean of the Yale School of Drama; and as a member of the National Endowment for the Arts' National Council, Dean Richards, says one writer, "has come to wield one of the most quietly influential voices in American theater."*[1] *Whether Richards plans to "leave" or "be retired" from his post as Yale's Dean of Drama, both the School of Drama and theater lovers stand to inherit a rich legacy from an intellectually and artistically brilliant man.*

After the necessary formalities in his York Street office during that August afternoon, Dean Richards gave me a seat next to him and sank into a worn leather chair. As I suspect he does to each play he encounters at the Rep or the O'Neill Center, he then proceeded to dissect carefully each of my questions before responding.

SHANNON: Dean Richards, as a director, when do you know that a play is ready for the stage?

RICHARDS: Ready for the stage doesn't necessarily mean ready for an audience or ready to be a hit or ready in any other component. Ready for the stage, to me, means that there is a true line to the dramatic action in the play, that the characters are relatively clear, that they speak with an individual voice, and that they interact with one another with some degree of reality. Then they can begin to explore questions that may exist within the piece as you work on it.

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SHANNON: How would you describe your style as a director?

RICHARDS: I guess other people will say about that—and I agree with them—that I try and elicit from the actor that which I want him to achieve. In other words, I try to stimulate, provoke, or question, and in the process of the actor's discovery, he should arrive at the point where I want him to be, both physically and otherwise.

SHANNON: Where do you draw the line between the playwright's intent and your own ideas on how the play should be staged?

RICHARDS: I don't draw the line. I consider my responsibility to be to fulfill the intent of the playwright in his work, which does not mean necessarily that I literally do that because sometimes the playwright is not totally conscious of everything that exists in his work. You know, he sees it one way or sees it on one level, but there's a little bit more to an individual, a character, to a situation, to what really has been the deepest provocation of what the playwright is writing about. So my contributions are in both discovering what he has to say, illuminating that and enhancing that.

SHANNON: I understand that you will leave your post as Dean of the Yale School of Drama in June 1991. What words, if any, would you have for a successor? Any ideas on the kind of person that should be?

RICHARDS: Well, the fact is, I am not leaving my post. I'm being retired—being retired; I'm not retiring. I'm being retired because there are certain regulations within the university that stipulate the time that a dean can serve. I have served that full time and even beyond that because I was asked to stay on, and they did alter the regulations somewhat to permit me to do that. So I've been here longer than I expected to be here, and they've been wonderful years. So, I'm not leaving because anything's wrong or because they consider I'm too old or too young or too this or too that, but because in the normal running of the university, this is when I should be replaced.

I have no words of wisdom for a successor. I don't know what I would have wanted someone to say to me before I took this over when I took it over. I was, more or less, given a free hand to create the kind of program that I thought this should be within the strictures of the mission of the program. And that is to find, to discover the most talented persons in every area of the theater and to provide them with the best training toward their participation in the profession of theater that was possible and to give them some kind of a bridge into professional work. Now that I defined and took as the mission of this program. That means I thought about its longevity. I demonstrated that, and my responsibility was to further that in my time. And that's what I set out to do. So what I would say to a successor is that the mission of the program—as it has been previously grounded from its previous days when George Pierce Baker began it in 1925— is sound.[2] There is a lot that has happened and can continue to happen given those basic strictures. Also, there is a wonderful alumni that has gone through this program and that are continually concerned that it continues to serve the future the-

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ater artists of our nation in the way that they have been served—not necessarily the same way but basically the same way.

SHANNON: Dean Richards, what was the racial climate like when you took this post in 1979?

RICHARDS: The racial climate on the campus?

SHANNON: Yes. Was that ever a factor?

RICHARDS: I found it no factor relative to myself. I did not feel particularly accepted because I was a black person or rejected because I was a black person. I was conscious of the fact that within the school there were a couple of persons who looked at their work from a racial point of view that was frequently dealt with. The university has not, in any way, made me sensitive to being a black person either by giving me extra things for that reason, which I don't want. I don't want anybody to give me something that I have not earned or taken something from me because of that. It may have happened, and I didn't know about it, but I would never vouch for that.

SHANNON: You and August Wilson seem to have such a pleasant working relationship. What is it about him and his work that makes this possible?

RICHARDS: I guess we both listen to each other. I think there's a whole background that also makes it possible. We find that we are sensitive to the same things. We have many of the same values, value system, sense of fidelity, family, responsibility. I continually find that we're alike in many ways, though that is not always the insurance of good work. Sometimes to not be alike results in productive work. Ours has worked because we've seen kind of eye to eye, which doesn't mean that we don't question one another.

SHANNON: I guess that relates to my next question. To what extent has being African-American helped your collaboration with him?

RICHARDS: Oh, very much. Very much. I think he has said that the first time that we went to the rehearsal and I talked to the cast about his play, he learned things, and he learned that I understood his work and all of the ramifications of it and that it wasn't necessary for him to sit in the room and check me because we were both coming from the same place.

SHANNON: Do you maintain contact with Wilson during off-season? As far as you know, what project is he working on now?

RICHARDS: Well, we together are working on the play *Two Trains Running* at the current time. I know that he is thinking ahead to the next play and doing some work on it. I don't ask him about the next play. Other people do. Reporters like to ask that.

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When it's time for me to deal with it, I'll get it. But, yes, we do stay in touch quite regularly to see how things are going.

SHANNON: What is your secret to being a good director?

RICHARDS: I don't know. I've never defined that, but I think a good director must listen, must see, must hear—not just listen, must hear. And he must see the unusual, hear the unspoken, sense people, have a sense of form, have a sense of color, have a sense of what is drama. He must know where does the drama lie in events, not just the sense of event but a sense of drama. Where do you put the camera? Where do you focus the eye? Where is the drama in the big scene? And, I think we must have that.

SHANNON: Do you regard the audience's make-up and their possible reactions when deciding upon the best direction for a play? Can you give an example?

RICHARDS: I take my own reactions. I'm an audience. If I begin to try and project for thousands of people, I can do nothing but confuse myself. I respond, and I am an audience. And so really I work for me, knowing that within me are the seeds of the responses of many different people.

SHANNON: What happens to a Wilson play from the time you first encounter it to its possible Broadway run?

RICHARDS: Most of them have started at the National Playwright's Conference at the O'Neill Center, which I run in Waterford, Connecticut every year. I don't direct them there because I'm producing fourteen plays in twenty-eight days, so I don't have time to, but they start there and we talk about the work there. Then when it is optioned for Yale, I become the director of it. Then we begin to work on the play on the basis of what we learned at the O'Neill and what is added to that in terms of questions. Then we do it at Yale. We have a number of theaters throughout the country now that are very interested in our work, and so to continually work, we may do the production at various of those theaters throughout the country. Broadway is never the goal; it never has been. The first audience that sits in the theater right here at Yale—that's who I create for. Then once having surfaced and corrected any problems there, we may take it to places. Now, New York is just another venue. It's a very different one in that it is much more difficult to take a play into New York than it is to take it to any of the centers throughout the country.

SHANNON: Is that because of the financing aspects?

RICHARDS: Because of finance and because you're going for a limited run. You go to Los Angeles, for example, for so many weeks. There's a subscription. So it works. We don't have to worry about whether we've got to get smash reviews today in order for the show to run tomorrow. That's what happens in New York. And you go to New York and don't have a subscription. Now some people have names and some of them

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have advanced sales. You put up certain names and people buy tickets to see them in anything. With most of August's work, we have very small advanced sales. We've never gone for stars that sell so many weeks ahead. And so, what you have to know when you go to New York is that if there isn't a line at the box office the day after you open, you're in trouble. A lot of money has gone to waste.

SHANNON: How do you gauge a play's success when it opens at the Yale Rep? Do you poll the audience? Do you observe their reactions? How do you determine what scenes may need to be deleted or modified after a run there?

RICHARDS: A play's success—I'm never dealing with success. What we deal with is in the scope of the work as the art of the work functions. Is that working? Are these scenes working in the play when we expected them to work? And you judge that by being in the audience seeing how they respond.

SHANNON: You mentioned that *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* had some problems when you first ran across it at the O'Neill. How were you able to convert this diamond-in-the-rough into a Broadway gem?

RICHARDS: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* started out initially as two plays, which were blended together. One question was "Should they have been separated or blended together?" Other questions had to do with the fact that a play had been written with five major musicians in five major roles, meaning that a smart playwright doesn't do that. It was hard enough to get five wonderful actors, but to get them to play an instrument well was another problem. So that had to be dealt with. There's the question "How did I deal with that?" Then the work on the play became the blending of those two plays making them essential to one another rather than just tickets. That was the basis of the work.

SHANNON: In Wilson's initial portrayal of Ma Rainey, did she have less of a focal role, or was that a result of your editing the play?

RICHARDS: No.

SHANNON: As it stands now, she's not—I don't consider her to be a main character.

RICHARDS: She isn't.

SHANNON: Was she ever the main character?

RICHARDS: No. She was the main character of one of those plays. See, there was a play that took place in the recording studio and a play that took place in a bandroom, which were totally separate plays initially. So if you took that one little play about the recording studio, she was the central character in that and if you took the little play in the bandroom, somebody else was the central character in that. But when you put

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those two plays together—we didn't put it together to make up a good role for Ma Rainey.

SHANNON: So ultimately, then, Levee rises and becomes the focal character?

RICHARDS: Yes. He is the person who generates the action of the play.

SHANNON: I saw *The Piano Lesson* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, DC, where it ran in November 1989. I was also in the audience for the question and answer session with you and August at its premiere. I understand that since then, the ending has been altered. Can you explain how and why these changes were made?

RICHARDS: The ending of the play was altered continually for over two years. What you saw in Washington was an altered ending. Initially when we started the work at Yale, we were not satisfied with the ending. But when you talk about changing an ending—you don't just change an ending. You find where the play needs to go and how it needs to go there. And we were conscious of it when we were at Yale when we were in rehearsal—that we didn't have an end to the play. As a matter of fact, August thought that the play never ended. But the fact is you have to have a resolution to the evening for the people who are sitting there. So we looked and tried things—various things to find a resolution to the play. Until then, I devised a finish that we never considered an ending. But it was a finish for the evening while we were still working on the end.

SHANNON: It's still a mystery to me because I have not been able to see the new ending. I saw the original one in *Theater,* and I think that that had been changed before it made the stage. So what ultimately happens is that we know for sure what happens to the piano?

RICHARDS: We know what is going to happen.

SHANNON: It is not sold? It is kept as a family heirloom?

RICHARDS: Yes.

SHANNON: The mystery has just been solved.

Do you have any definite ideas on portraying the African-American woman? Was this a concern when directing *Raisin* or any other play?

RICHARDS: By concern, I'm not quite sure what you mean. I have lived with a number of African-American women, including my mother and many others for whom I have had great concern and regard. I was never distrustful of either my understanding or appreciation of the women whom I have been in touch with. I have never considered it a problem. There's always the hope expressed by those people who feel that there should be more for the woman to do in a particular play. And that would be

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nice, but maybe that play isn't about that at that time. And I know that August, at one point, was concerned about including more women in his work, which I think he has made a conscious attempt to do. But now in terms of his understanding or appreciation, I think he has written some of the most wonderful speeches about women in his work. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Bynum has a beautiful speech about women. There's a wonderful appreciation and understanding there that enter into the action of the play and is very dependent upon what the play chooses to be about.

SHANNON: To me, Ma Rainey, Rose, and Berneice represent independent, strong women, but each has weaknesses. What is your idea of these women and how do you try to convey your ideas of them onto the stage? Or is it, as you've just suggested, not an issue?

RICHARDS: The fact that a character has a weakness only means that he is human. I don't think that any of the characters that August writes are inhuman, which means that they have strengths and weaknesses. They have likes, loves, fears, but they are interesting human beings which is an essential component to an interesting character. Otherwise, you're writing a figure or an idea, not a human being. I think that all of August's characters have weaknesses, and that includes the women. I think they are wonderfully human given those weaknesses and strengths.

SHANNON: Would you consider Wilson's plays male-centered?

RICHARDS: These are questions for historians who evaluate. Maybe one day if I sat down to begin to judge August's plays—but that's not where my work is centered, and I am not in a position to judge at this point. There are people who come up to me: "Oh, such and such a play is my favorite play." I say, "Oh, fine! Thank you." They say "Which is yours?" They're all my favorite plays. For me, it's like answering "Which of your children do you love the most?" "Which is your favorite?" I have no favorites.

SHANNON: What effect do you think Wilson has had on American theater?

RICHARDS: Oh, I think he's had a wonderful effect upon the American theater. I think that he has stimulated playwrights to write. He has stimulated black playwrights to write. Always when one looks at achievement, there is a stimulus in that. Someone will say "Let me try that." And that is very important. That is very, very important because it brought black people into the theater in various areas of the country—all over the country. People want to go to the theater and go places where they can see themselves reflected or their concerns reflected. And if they find that in the theater, that's the place that they will go. And so people are coming into the theater.

SHANNON: This reminds me of what has been quoted as your favorite anecdote of the cleaning woman whom you met in the lobby who said "I think something is going on here that concerns me."

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One theater critic wrote, "Eugene O'Neill's bonafide successor in the American Theater may have emerged, and his name is August Wilson." Do you think this is a fair comparison?

RICHARDS: I think all comparisons are unfair. I don't think that August Wilson should be expected to live up to O'Neill or O'Neill to live up to August Wilson. I think they are both major playwrights that America should be proud of—all Americans.

SHANNON: In general, how have white audiences responded to Wilson's work?

RICHARDS: Very warmly. Very warmly. The major comments or the most universal comment that comes from a white audience is that "It is not just a black play. It's also a play about me." And they find their own identification within the work. Why? Because it's human. It's very, very human.

SHANNON: What do you look for in any character? What do you look for in, say, a Troy or a Boy Willie or a Ma Rainey, for example?

RICHARDS: That he's true to himself, that the character is real and is not manipulated, that the character is a human being who determines his own life, and that I don't feel the playwright behind him manipulating—that he is a valid character.

SHANNON: To what extent do you depend upon lighting to convey a play's meaning? Can you give an example of how light interprets mood or meaning in one of the plays you've directed by Wilson?

RICHARDS: Light is always a very important component in the creation of mood. We're always dealing with time and place, particularly with a playwright who writes in realistic style. So light helps to create time, suggests time and creates mood and mood is place—a very important part of place. I'm always conscious of the utilization of light, but particularly since most of his [Wilson's] plays take place in one place. You're constantly changing place through lighting.

SHANNON: There's a beautiful light that shines on the piano. A strange feeling comes from that.

RICHARDS: Well, that's part of what goes on. I think that during the Sunday evening scene in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, just before the Juba[3] is danced, there is a creation of reminiscence of what even The Last Supper looked like—the light that he [Wilson] preferred in the last supper. There was a use of light in that. The reason there are shutters on the front of that house is because I used the light coming through the shutters on people to create mood—different kinds of people, different moods. The whole *Piano Lesson*, which, by virtue of having the living room in the kitchen, the sun rises on one and sets on the other. So we use that to create differences in mood in a

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room that does not change. There is a lot of subtle lighting that plays constantly to alter the mood, to isolate, to highlight.

SHANNON: What role does music play, specifically the blues?

RICHARDS: August is rooted in the blues. For him, in everything there is the blues. It is a very important part of his work, and I handle his plays as though they were music.

SHANNON: Meaning?

RICHARDS: Well, I direct them with rhythms and just how that play in itself moves both physically and vocally.

SHANNON: I remember your favorite anecdote about a cleaning woman you met in the lobby during a Philadelphia performance of *Raisin.* In a recent interview, Wilson expressed concern "that his work might not be reaching black people." Do you share his concern?

RICHARDS: Yes. It is reaching black people.

SHANNON: Do you think Wilson's work has special meaning to African-Americans?

RICHARDS: Yes. I think it is an important part or reflection of themselves. One begins to see oneself on the stage and see aspects of oneself that one might not have recognized or accepted before. You can tell in *Fences* when it gets into the second act. There are Albertas in the audience, and you can identify them by their response to certain scenes. There are Roses in the audience, and they are different. And so, when one even talks of the black woman, they are not the same. There are Roses. There are Albertas. All of those characters are there, and yet the energy of the response is to that self from the anticipation that it brings out and even to some of the stupidest things that they have said or done. August's plays do reach black people.

SHANNON: Do you have any concerns about how *Fences* might be handled on the big screen?

RICHARDS: Oh, I'm concerned about it, but there's nothing I can do about it. I'm only responsible for what I get a chance to do here.

SHANNON: Is there a chance that something might be lost in transferring it to another medium?

RICHARDS: Yes, of course.

SHANNON: Could a director of plays direct a movie?

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RICHARDS: Sure.

SHANNON: What are some major differences or similarities?

RICHARDS: Theater is much more of a verbal medium. Motion pictures are the visual medium. You say a lot with pictures and with angles of pictures in what you choose to show. See, on the stage, the director focuses your attention continually to different people just by virtue of the way things move, by the way things are lit, by the way things are. It's all that. But you're looking at the whole picture that becomes suddenly in focus if you are made to focus in a particular direction. In film, that is a definite focus. You take the camera, and you point it. So just by the definition of what you want to convey through a picture, the expectation in film is the visual. So you have the option to leave that stage and go on to other places. It is your choice of places that become the backgrounds for events, what substitutes for words. There are a great many things to consider.

SHANNON: In what ways were you affected by the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s?

RICHARDS: During the 1960s more black people began to participate in the act of theater, reutilizing it as a form of expression of purpose, which it has always been.

SHANNON: How have your directing skills been strengthened from directing Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* to directing August Wilson's works?

RICHARDS: Now, you learn from everything that you do and every form you work with. As a director, I've been very fortunate that in my lifetime, I had the opportunity to do the work of two major writers—black writers. And I think that that is unusual. Not everybody gets that. Not everybody gets one great writer whose work you become associated with by doing it first. I think I was lucky.

SHANNON: Now that *Two Trains Running* has completed its debut at Yale Rep, what's being done to it?

RICHARDS: We will do it at least three times this coming season in different theaters throughout the country.

SHANNON: I hope Washington, DC will be among the three. What was your biggest challenge in directing *Two Trains Running*?

RICHARDS: The through-line of *Two Trains*. We're still working on the through-line of the play—the basic action that moves the play. We're still working on that.

SHANNON: What inspired you to choose Chekhov's *Ivanov*, Korder's *Search and Destroy*, and Sobol's *Underground* for your final season?

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RICHARDS: *Ivanov* is a Chekhov play that I have wanted to do, and, as a matter of fact, I invited Oleg Yefremov, who is the Artistic Director of the Moscow Art Theater, to direct that play for me eight years ago. So it's just finding fruition now. Some of the things that one does involve years in the making. You don't just choose to do them, and they're done. Korder's *Search and Destroy* is about a contemporary American problem—success. What is that, and what does it do to you if you don't handle it well. *Underground*, Sobol's play, which is the third in a trilogy—I haven't done the other two. I haven't had the opportunity to do them. It is about the Second World War, and it is about anti-Semitism in the Soviet Union. It is sad to say that was a problem that I thought we dealt with in the Second World War. People died about that. And to see the resurgence of anti-Semitism throughout the world is frightening. Nobody is safe as long as any of us are not safe or not free or ostracized for racial reasons. Nobody is safe. It is something that we have to keep in the front of our minds.

SHANNON: Will you continue to be affiliated with Yale's Drama School in any way?

RICHARDS: Well, I don't create the program for the next director. I am affiliated by virtue of the fact that I will be a "past dean." And so you are affiliated, and you know that in some respect, you have put some marks on the program. Whether I will actually be involved in the program, I have no idea. That has to do with whatever I choose to do in the future and whatever the new dean chooses to want to do. I hope that I can be, through my work, considered a supporter.

SHANNON: Well, I'd like to think that I'm speaking on behalf of all African-Americans by thanking you for the work that you've done here. Certainly it has reached us, and we have indeed benefited from your genius. And thank you for the interview.

RICHARDS: That is good to hear because it has been an important part of the Rep—to get it around, to reach out to let it be experienced throughout the nation, which has been a more compelling goal than, say, New York. New York has never been a goal, but what you speak about has been a goal. And what has been so valuable is to go around the country a few times and see how it has changed—how now when one of our works is coming to some place, there's an anticipation of it rather than having to find the people for it.

SHANNON: I can definitely vouch for that based upon the reactions of the Washington, DC, audiences to *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Fences*, and *The Piano Lesson*.

RICHARDS: Thank you. We'll be back.

Notes

1. Hilary De Vries, "Drama Lesson," *The Boston Globe*, June 24, 1990, p. 20.
2. George Pierce Baker, a noted playwrighting teacher at Harvard during the early 1900s, devised a

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very successful playwrighting course there called Drama 47. Eugene O'Neill was one of its star pupils. In 1925, Baker was invited to Yale to initiate a first-rate drama program.

3. The Juba, according to Wilson's stage directions, "is reminiscent of the Ring Shouts of the African slaves. It is a call and response dance."

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