

GEM OF THE OCEAN
Round House Theatre
December 8, 2018

INTRODUCTION

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten. Please adjust the volume control on your receiver as low as possible for the best listening. Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one.

Good afternoon and welcome to *Gem of the Ocean* at Round House Theatre. I'm Sylvia Rosenthal, your volunteer from the Metropolitan Washington Ear, the radio reading service for the visually impaired of Greater Washington, DC, which is bringing you the Audio Description for today's performance.

Gem of the Ocean runs approximately 2 hours and 50 minutes with a 15-minute intermission. So, the show should end shortly before 5:00.

BACKGROUND

The play is set in 1904, in Aunt Ester's home at 1839 Wylie Avenue in Pittsburgh's Hill District.

The dramaturg, Gabrielle Hoyt, writes "[T]his Hill District residence has no protected status or legal standing but has become a haven for those in need of healing and restoration. Its inhabitants describe it as a 'peaceful home' free from the violence and danger of the outside world."

From the website: As turmoil swirls in Pittsburgh's Hill District over a tragedy at the local mill, the "American Century" dawns in Aunt Ester's kitchen when Citizen Barlow arrives to have his soul cleansed by the venerable, 285-year-old soothsayer. Neighborhood personalities mesh and collide as the household prepares for his mystical quest. But with the scars left by the Civil War still fresh, one man's redemption could mean the end of the uneasy calm holding this African-American community together. This first chapter of August Wilson's monumental play cycle challenges us to

examine our notions of “freedom” in a country where the end of slavery opened the door to more insidious systems of oppression.

ARTISTIC TEAM

THE PLAYWRIGHT is August Wilson, whose plays have been produced on Broadway, at regional theaters across the country and all over the world. He has received numerous awards including two Pulitzer Prizes, a Tony Award, Great Britain’s Olivier Award and eight New York Drama Critics Circle Awards. Mr. Wilson was inducted posthumously into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 2007. A Pittsburgh native, his most celebrated achievement is the Century Cycle, a chronology of ten plays each set in a different decade of the twentieth century, that explore the heritage and experience of African Americans decade-by-decade. They are meant to engage in “a kind of review, or re-examination of history.”

THE DIRECTOR, is Timothy Douglas.

THE SCENIC DESIGNER is Tony Cisek.

THE COSTUME DESIGNER is Kara Harmon and

SOUND DESIGN and ORIGINAL MUSIC are by Justin Ellington.

THE SETTING

When you enter the theater, the stage is set with the kitchen of Aunt Ester’s home. The area is dominated by a large, rectangular wooden table that has traces of black paint around the legs. The table sits in the center of a worn brown and tan wooden plank floor. Aunt Ester’s oak pressed arm chair is at the head of the table on the left. It has a seat cushion with long white fringe that hangs down the front of the chair. Mismatched oak side chairs with spindle backs are placed at the other three sides of the table.

Behind the table and to the right is a small wooden platform that leads to a massive dark wood entrance door with frosted glass panels on the upper half. Black address numbers are painted on the top panel. A man’s hat and

jacket are hung on a hook to the left of the door and there is a worn-looking wooden stool on the right side of the door, where Eli frequently sits.

In the corner to the left of the table is the kitchen work area. A vintage black stove and a worn-looking green cupboard are placed against the back wall. A heavy black pot sits on the stove. Cups and dishes are on the shelves of the cupboard and a wooden bread box and a white basin are placed on top. Next to the cupboard are a sink and a water pump built into a dark wood cabinet. A small basket sits on the floor next to another pressed back oak chair just beyond the sink, where Black Mary occasionally sits.

The right and left walls are solid black, and the back wall is formed by a series of dark metallic-looking rectangular panels in a vertical pattern. Seven narrow shelves are randomly attached to the panels and a row of candles is on each shelf. A steep wooden staircase with a landing at the top is at the back of stage on the left side and a kerosene lantern is hung above it all.

CAST & COSTUMES

Costumes are typical of the time period. Women wear floor-length skirts and men wear suspenders.

AUNT ESTER TYLER is a very old, yet vital spiritual advisor for the community. She is a slender woman of medium height with wiry salt and pepper hair and braids that circle her head. She has a long, thin face and walks with difficulty. In the opening scene, she appears in a white nightgown with a gold silk shawl wrapped around her shoulders. During the day that follows, she is wearing a white long-sleeve blouse under a predominantly red patchwork vest, a long gray skirt, dangling earrings and a strand of beads.

AUNT ESTER is played by **STEPHANIE BERRY**, who is making her Round House Theatre debut. She has appeared at several regional theaters, as well as TV and film, including all the *Law and Order* shows. She is also the

recipient of an Obie Award and the co-founder of a community-based documentary theatre company.

ELI is Aunt Ester's gatekeeper and longtime friend of Solly. He is a short and stocky man with a bald head. His black beard and mustache are tinged with gray. He wears a long sleeve tan checked shirt and brown pants.

ELI is played by **JEFFERSON A. RUSSELL**. He has appeared previously at Round House as well as other local theatres. His TV credits include HBO's *The Wire* and NBC's *Homicide: Life on the Streets*. Mr. Russell is a former Baltimore Police Officer and a founding member of GALVANIZE, a network for artists of color.

CITIZEN BATLOW is a young man from Alabama in his late twenties or early thirties who is in spiritual turmoil. He is a short and slender with the hint of a black beard and mustache. He wears a blue denim jacket, a cream-colored shirt with the sleeves rolled up, tan pants and tan work boots.

CITIZEN BARLOW is played by **JUSTIN WEAKS**, who has appeared at several local theaters and is the recipient of a Helen Hayes Supporting Actor Award. He has New York and other regional theater credits as well.

BLACK MARY, Aunt Ester's protégé and housekeeper, is in her late twenties. She is a tall, buxom woman with a full figure and thick waist. She has a care-worn expression on her round, attractive face. Her thick black hair is piled on her head and held in place with a tan comb in the back. She first appears in a long-sleeve, dark blue paisley blouse with white lace trim, a blue skirt and a blue checked apron tied around her waist. She adds a matching, peplum-style blue jacket and a black hat to go shopping. Later she changes to a yellow top.

BLACK MARY is played by **STORI AYERS**, who previously appeared at Round House Theatre in *Father Comes Home From the Wars* (Parts 1, 2, & 3) She also has New York and regional credits and is the winner of the Graham F. Smith Peace Foundation Prize.

RUTHERFORD SELIG is a traveling peddler who is a frequent visitor to the house and the only white person in the cast. He is a short, scruffy-looking man with a slight build and short brown hair. He wears a shabby brown overcoat, tan shirt and brown pants.

MICHAEL GLENN, who plays RUTHERFORD SELIG, previously appeared at Round House Theatre in *Small Mouth Sounds*, *Stage Kiss* and *This*. He has also performed at nearly every area stage.

SOLLY TWO KINGS is a sixty-seven-year-old suitor to Aunt Ester and former Underground Railroad conductor. He is tall with white hair and beard and a receding hair-line. There is a bald spot on top of his head, and he has a slight paunch. He carries a chest-high pole of thick light wood that is carved in a twisted pattern at the top. He enters wearing a brown Stetson-type hat, long tan coat over a tan vest, blue shirt and tan pants.

SOLLY TWO KINGS is played by **ALFRED WILSON**, who is also making his Round House Theatre debut. He has extensive regional theater credits, including several other works by August Wilson.

CAESAR WILKS is Black Mary's brother and the local constable. He is about fifty-two. A short, stocky man with a solid build, bald head, a small gray beard and black mustache. He enters dressed almost entirely in black - a black derby, black overcoat, black suit, black and gray stiped tie, white shirt and a dark gray vest. He also wears a silver star on his jacket lapel and carries a gun on his hip.

CEASAR WILKS is played by **KENYATTA ROGERS**, who has appeared at Round House previously as well as numerous other local theatres. His TV credits include the PBS series *Standard Deviants' Television* and he is a recipient of the Theatre Lobby's Mary Goldwater Award.

This concludes the program notes for Act I. The next voice you hear will that of your live audio narrator. I'll be back five minutes before the second act begins with more background information. I hope you enjoy the show.

INTERMISSION NOTES

Hello, and welcome back to the Metropolitan Washington Ear's audio description of *Gem of the Ocean*. I hope you've been enjoying the production.

It's interesting to note that Aunt Ester is referenced in other Wilson Cycle Century plays as well. She is the flesh-and-blood embodiment of the sum presence of African people in America. Said just the right way, her name sounds like "ancestor."

The set remains the same for Act II, but some of the costumes change.

Black Mary is wearing a light turquoise blue, scoop-neck dress. Eli adds a brown vest and Aunt Ester has changed to a red striped skirt. After Aunt Ester tells him to change clothes, Citizen Barlow appears in a light green shirt and light gray pants.

In the first scene, Black Mary holds up a five-foot square quilt while Aunt Ester explains the symbols. The quilt has patches of blue, white, green and tan patterned fabric. There are three graduating rows of small tan triangles inside a large white triangle in the center of the quilt and tan strings hang down from the bottom of the large triangle. There is also a large white sailing ship in the upper left corner of the quilt.

During the soul cleansing scene, a tight white scarf is rolled around Aunt Ester's head and she is wearing a long sleeveless red, white and blue patchwork cape with a hood. Black Mary wears a long scarf made of fabric matching Aunt Ester's cape. It also has white fringe at each end.

During that same scene, Aunt Ester and Mary place a white tunic with wide elbow-length sleeves and a round neck over Citizen Barlow's clothes. Eli and Solly Two Kings cover their faces with white masks that have angular features and severe expressions. As the man at the gate, Solly Two Kings covers his entire head with a dark grotesque mask.

This concludes the intermission notes for Act II. The next voice you hear will be that of your live audio narrator.

