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I must also give gratitude to August Wilson for encouraging me to find my song:

“Confront the dark parts of yourself – work to banish them with illumination and forgiveness. Your willingness to wrestle with your demons will cause your angels to sing. Use the pain as fuel, as a reminder of your strength.” – August Wilson

A special thank you belongs to Dr. Mikell Pinkney and Dr. Hely Perez for their leadership and light in leading the way through the Ocean.

I’d also like to thank the following SOTD performance faculty: Tim Altmyer; Kathy Sarra; Dr. Charlie Mitchell; Tiza Garland; Dr. David Young; Dr. Judith Williams; Yanci Bukovec; and Sarah White.
August Wilson’s Pittsburgh cycle chronicles the African-American experience in America by representing each decade in the twentieth century. Influenced by the creative writing of Jorge Borges, the political art perspective of Amiri Baraka, the paintings and collage art of Romare Bearden, and the Blues, Wilson connects the African-American tradition in conjunction with the spiritual roots of Africa. Eighth in a cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* serves as the first play in the ten-part series beginning in 1904. The play marks the story of Mr. Citizen Barlow and his journey of self and communal discovery as he travels to the City of Bones under the guidance of Aunt Ester, Eli, Solly Two Kings, and Black Mary Wilks. The following document traces my process of character development for the role of Black Mary Wilks, the young female domestic and spiritual protégé in training under the tutelage of Aunt Ester in Dr. Mikell Pinkney’s production of *Gem of the Ocean*. 
My investigation into the poetic and blues-inspired language of August Wilson is shown with the implementation of Arthur Lessac’s voice training system. The Lessac system lends itself to examining language on a micro-level. Through in-depth vocal markings of consonants and vowels, breath-markings, enjambment, and the exploration of operative work, I will demonstrate how I was able to orchestrate the text on stage and bring the musicality of Wilson’s language alive. For this project Dr. Pinkney asked us to reach beyond what is in front of us and connect to our ancestors, a new element to introduce and integrate into my creative process. As a result, I connected to books that I have read, images, and quotes from artists, writers, and poets, to keep fueling and inspiring my creative journey. In addition, my research into the time period and August Wilson’s creative background, text analysis, rehearsal preparation, and journaling will also be explored as foundational to my process of character creation, as well as the importance of other elements such as set, costume, and movement (specifically Alexander Technique). The process begins with an in-depth exploration of August Wilson followed by director Dr. Pinkney’s vision, the numeration of my personal goals and challenges with the character, rehearsal preparation, character development, as well as feedback and criticism from the performances.
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I. INTRODUCTION

AUGUST WILSON (1945-2005)

Self-educated from the age of fifteen years old, August Wilson gained insight into community and the search for self through his life growing up in the Hill District in Pittsburgh Pennsylvania. Born Frederick August Kittle in 1945 to Daisy Wilson and his father, a German Baker, Wilson grew up in a cold-water flat at 1727 Bedford Avenue. Outraged after being wrongfully accused of cheating on a paper he had written on Napoleon, Wilson stopped attending school. “I dropped out of school, but I didn’t drop out of life” noted Wilson (“Feed Your Mind”). He spent his days at the Carnegie Library and enjoyed being able to learn outside the rigorous confines of the standard curriculum.

He absorbed the environment around him and was a consummate listener. When he spoke, he was able to woo the room as an orator and storyteller. Wilson became a poet, lover of blues, and is now renown for a rhythmic cadence and musicality of language fused with the ancestral storytelling tradition. Overall, his writing was influenced by what can be notably described as the four B’s: the Blues; creative writer Jorge Luis Borges; artist Roman Bearden; and activist Amiri Baraka.

The Four B’s: Blues, Borges, Baraka, and Bearden

Born of African rhythms, slave songs and spirituals, the blues is an extension of the oral story-telling tradition. Since there was no television, conversations that occurred in barbershops or corner stores in Pittsburgh’s Hill District served as the oral history of
the people. It was their news, entertainment, and a vital connection between people as telephones had yet to have been invented. The telling and retelling of current events and happenings from down south in story and in song were in the vein of African griots, also known as cultural keepers and storytellers.

From the Argentinian creative writer Borges, Wilson “learned that you can be specific to a time and place and culture and still have the work resonate with the universal themes of love, honor, duty, betrayal, etc…” (Isherwood 4). With all but one of his plays taking place in the Hill District in Pittsburgh (Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom is set in Chicago), Wilson’s canon explores themes of: slavery and imprisonment; music and song; relationships between men, women, friends, and family; gentrification, the economic upgrading of a community that in turn forces out those current residents of lower socio-economic groups, often this subgroup of people contains persons of color; intergenerational conflict; and the difficulty of remaining connected to one’s community in the face of betrayal or self-doubt.

Amiri Baraka, formerly known as LeRoi Jones, a poet and activist, is the third ‘B’ that influenced August Wilson’s writing. Wilson used real life events like the kidnappings of men of color by Joe Turner in the south and The Great Migration North (in Joe Turner’s Come and Gone) as historical reference points to then write, re-right (or correct historical accounts written by the majority by providing an account from a minority perspective) or re-memory of the history of ancestors by penning a story of African-American struggle for acceptance and meaning. Wilson noted “[f]rom Amiri Baraka I learned that all art is political, though I don’t write political plays” (The Art of Theatre). Thematically, Wilson’s Pittsburgh cannon addresses: the integration of blacks into
sports in *Fences*; the manipulation of black musical artists from white ownership in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*; the impact of the prison industrial complex and small business management in *Jitney*; and the threat to African-American community through gentrification in *Radio Golf*.

From musical to political muses, Wilson was also influenced by visual arts, specifically the works of collage and mixed media artist, Romare Bearden. Romare’s works are like quilt work, depicting people with oversized features, eyes, noses, and hands against vibrant landscapes, and illustrating black life experiences of epic storytelling proportions.

Wilson mused about Bearden exclaiming, “[w]hat I saw was black life, presented on its own terms, on a grand and epic scale, with all its richness and fullness, in a language that was vibrant and which, made attendant to everyday life, ennobled it, affirmed its value, and exalted its presence. It defined not only the character of black American life, but also its conscience” (Van Dorpe). In 1998 at the Hood Museum of Art, Wilson commented about the complexities and magnitude in the artistic vision of Romare Bearden: “I was looking at myself in ways I hadn’t thought of before and have never ceased to think of since…,” as a result of Bearden’s contribution to black expression and life (Van Dorpe). Wilson drew direct inspiration from Bearden’s *Piano Lesson* (1983) when he created the fourth play of the cannon, *The Piano Lesson*, a drama revolving around a sibling rivalry over the future of a family heirloom, a hand engraved piano with the faces of their once enslaved ancestors. I found it interesting that the National Gallery of Art notes that the “central subject of this composition [Bearden’s *Piano Lesson*] is thought to be jazz pianist, Mary Lou Williams, who spent
her childhood years in Pittsburgh....” This link to Wilson’s hometown of Pittsburgh and the connection to this love for music as an extension of black culture and community illuminates the artist’s creative connection (The Art of Romare Bearden).

The creative bond between artists did not end there, Wilson used Bearden’s *Mill Hands Lunch Bucket* (1978) [pg 54]. as a spring board for the creation of *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Investigating Romare’s work, a dark brooding figure is found slumped over in the chair, representative of the character of the lost Herald Loomis struggling to piece his life back together after seven years of imprisonment, as well as a vibrant, wide-eyed and large-handed character of Jeremy in motion, moving down the stairs and eager for what lies ahead. Beyond the confines of the house, the still mill is pictured in the background, bright and burning, reflective of a Pittsburgh skyline.

August Wilson passed away in October of 2005 from cancer, just after the completion of *Radio Golf*. This was the last play of the cycle about gentrification and the controversy over the destruction of the spiritual house of Aunt Ester, 1839 Wylie Avenue. A two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, Wilson’s contribution to American theatre is priceless in its ability to convey a decade-long struggle for African-Americans and a quest for self and acceptance in the face of the challenges of oppression.

In addition to the universal themes, the political perspective, influence of storytelling Blues and the art of Romare Bearden, the Wilson canon is the search for spiritual fulfillment that spans from Christianity to African spirituality. It was also a quest for *identity and place within community* that comprises the cultural quilt that dramatist August Wilson crafted, as he reflected life for African-Americans throughout the twentieth century.
I was inspired at how diverse Wilson’s influences were, and knowledge of his life and artistic perspective gave me permission to incorporate my multiple artistic interests. The creation of African-American culture stems from a sense of re-memory; mining and collecting fragments of community and identity of the past, and forging those with the aspirations of the future. From a sociological perspective, I understood the complexities of this unique culture and through the University of Florida’s production of *Gem of the Ocean*, I was afforded the opportunity to infuse this knowledge into action through my creative process. “The act of memory is a physical act and lies at the heart of the theatre. If theatre were a verb, it would be ‘to remember’” (Bogart). We, the company of *Gem of the Ocean*, were going to embark on a journey of re-memory that would introduce the life and legacy of African-Americans in the 1900s during a time of struggle and re-invention that would be shared with a Gainesville, FL audience. This production represented a challenge of spiritual and artistic magnitude.

*Gem of the Ocean*, Pittsburgh, PA, 1904

*Gem of the Ocean* is the first play of the Pittsburgh canon and arguably the most misunderstood due to its duality of reality and spirituality. Completed second to last in 2003, two years before the completion of *Radio Golf*, *Gem of the Ocean* is significant as it introduces Aunt Ester, a “very old, yet vital spiritual advisor for the community” (*Gem introduction*). Ester Tyler resides at 1839 Wylie Avenue and serves her community, listening to the needs of those that come to find sanctuary. She provides spiritual leadership and guidance and carries with her the history of generations that have come
before her. Wilson utilizes the two-hundred and eighty-five year old matriarch as a reoccurring character in his series. She is inspired by *Prevalence of Ritual* (1964) the first series of paintings that Wilson encountered by Bearden [pg 55]. It is a mixed media piece which has been described as “a spirit figure in southern African-American culture, moved north as part of the Great Migration and reappears frequently in Bearden’s work. She is called upon to prepare love potions, cure illnesses, and assist with personal problems” (National Gallery of Art). The artwork is also printed on the cover of the Theatre Communications Group publication of *Gem of the Ocean*.

Aunt Ester recounts having traversed the middle passage and in the Hill District, she serves as the *Conjur Woman*, receiving guests on Tuesdays and aiding them in their search for peace. Wilson also includes Aunt Ester as a reoccurring character in the Pittsburgh cycle. Even when she does not appear in the play, the significance of her home is mentioned, even in the last play, *Radio Golf*. Wilson writes:

Aunt Ester has emerged for me as the most significant person of the cycle. The characters, after all, are her children. The wisdom and tradition she embodies are valuable tools for the reconstruction of their personality and for dealing with a society in which the contradictions, over the decades, have grown more fierce. (The Actors Theatre)

In *Gem of the Ocean*, once audiences are able to embrace the concept of a timeless, spiritual griot living in the Hill District, the play then furthers the magical spiritualism of his work by having Aunt Ester take Citizen Barlow on a journey on a slave ship through the middle passage to the ancestral mecca of the City of Bones. The image most associated with the atrocities of the middle passage for me is that of the African slaves being stored head to foot in shackles below the ship’s deck [pg 56]. Wilson however, through Aunt Ester transcends this horrific memory into one of respect
and homage through his creation of the City of Bones, a culturally rich and vibrant city that lies below the watery grave of those Africans lost at sea.

In this speech, Aunt Ester explains the City of Bones to Citizen:

That’s the center of the world. In time it will all come to light. The people made a kingdom out of nothing. They were the people that didn’t make it across the water. They sat down right there. They say, ‘Let’s make a kingdom. Let’s make a city of bones.’ The people got a burning tongue, Mr. Citizen. Their mouths are on fire with song. That water can’t put it out. That song is powerful. It rise up and come across the waters. Then thousand tongues and ten thousand chariots coming across the water. They on their way, Mr. Citizen. (*Gem of the Ocean*, act 2, scene 1)

The boat they travel on to the center of the world is a boat folded from Ester’s slave bill of sale and although the group travels spiritually to the City of Bones, the action never leaves the confines of the living room. The journey to the City of Bones is a central cultural element in *Gem of the Ocean*, and it reflects the important aspect of re-memory and re-righting the past, in order for African-Americans to heal over their suffering and gain perspective into building their future. *Gem of the Ocean* sets the tone for the rest Wilson’s cycle, personifying the unique cultural, spiritual, economic, and racial variables impacting the lives of Black persons in America through storytelling, dance, song and faith.

*Gem of the Ocean* premiered at The Goodman Theatre in Chicago in the spring of 2003 and in Los Angeles that summer at the Center Theatre Group’s The Mark Taper Forum. In the fall of 2004, the production was presented at the Huntington Theatre Company before premiering on Broadway at the Walter Kerr Theatre in December of 2004. The cast was led by Phylicia Rashad portraying the role of Aunt Ester and Lisa
Gay Hamilton from the Huntington Theatre Company production played the character of Black Mary.

**Direction and Vision, Dr. Mikell Pinkney**

Dr. Mikell Pinkney’s vision revolved around highlighting the journey of the protagonist, Mr. Citizen Barlow through the infusion of community, storytelling, and cosmic connection. Frequently, the protagonist of *Gem of the Ocean* is misidentified as being the larger than life character, Aunt Ester, who was labeled by Wilson himself as his most poignant character of the Pittsburgh cycle, the mother giving birth to all of the other Wilsonian characters.

Pinkney’s desire to highlight the young man and protagonist, Citizen Barlow’s journey from Alabama to the City of Bones in order to find his song and place in this mad, mad world, in a time of transition and oppression would require a collective effort of the cast as Mr. Citizen is not alone on his quest for self and identity. He will learn that his ancestors accompany him on his quest and throughout the two acts, he is a student of those who have traveled to the city of bones before. Leading the way to Citizen’s confession and reclamation of self is Aunt Ester. She is accompanied by gatekeeper Eli, protector of the peaceful house, and Solomon or Solly Two Kings, traveling pure expert (dog manure used as fertilizer), both of whom had once worked the Underground Railroad leading slaves up North to freedom. Selig is a traveling pots and pan man with access to the community and the ability to travel outside without question, a friend of the 1839 Wylie avenue family. The antagonist and arguable embodiment of euro-centric assimilation is the boss man, Caesar Wilks, who is the policing catalyst for the play.
Finally, Black Mary Wilks, Aunt Ester’s protégé, assists Mr. Citizen to realize his calling, while simultaneously making transformational strides in her own discovery of self.

Pinkney illustrated the intentional similarities between the characters of *Gem of the Ocean* and the casting, noting that the actor cast as Citizen Barlow would need the teaching and assistance of the veteran members of the cast in order for our production to be successful. He noted that each actor had been specifically cast for the gifts they brought and each had a responsibility to help Mr. Citizen find his way. Additionally, in order to perform to our potential we must cultivate the community required to embody the cultural sanctuary of 1839 Wylie Avenue. This “life imitating art” parallel motivated many of the ensemble members to connect to the work above and beyond the responsibilities of a collegiate endeavor, and commit to a level of dedication birthed from a familial obligation and cultural pride. The union of the cast would serve to be instrumental in Pinkney’s vision and intention of also cultivating spirituality, as the reliance upon our ancestral heritage became an active ingredient in our creative process.

Charged with the task of staging one of the most misunderstood plays of Wilson’s cannon, Pinkney reminded us that the experience and humanity of the story was greater than the ensemble, and that spirituality could only be accomplished if we were to connect to our blood memory and cultural re-memory/re-righting of our history. He was emphatic that our unity as a group, our reliance upon language, as part of a larger diaspora of oral story telling tradition, and our connection to our ancestors would lead to the production’s success. Aware of August Wilson’s youth having been spent listening to the voices and stories of his community and Wilson’s enthusiasm about
collective expression, I understood what Dr. Pinkney was asking of us as a company and was ready for the challenge that lay ahead.

II. TEXT ANALYSIS

**Freytag, Dramatic Visual**

Text analysis provides the working structure for the creation of character that the actor can investigate and use their imagination to build upon. I prefer to read the story and create my own Freytag, or visual representation of the plot line that highlights significant events from the exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, and denouement [pg 57, 58]. The format of an August Wilson play is different than the neoclassicist tradition of five acts following the pattern of a rise of action until the climax then a subsequent falling action and conclusion. Wilson ends *Gem of the Ocean* after the death of Solly Two-Kings and leaves the audience questioning what Mr. Citizen Barlow will do with his newly acquired legacy from Solly. This was bestowed upon him along with the wise words of Eli, advising Mr. Barlow on his exit from 1839 Wylie Avenue -- “So live” (Gem 85).

The visual representation of the plot line allows me to familiarize myself with the time span and order of events. The two act play takes place over a span of a week, and having a clear sense of day and specific information regarding the time of day and season provides a plethora of information to help build the moment before and fill in the backstory (missing moments between scenes and prior to the play’s beginning) that is not provided within the text.
Timeline of *Gem of the Ocean*

**ACT I**

Prologue: Friday night. Autumn, 1904.

Scene 1: Saturday, next day.

Scene 2: Same day, later. Early evening.

Scene 3: A few days later.

Scene 4: Very early the next morning.

Scene 5: Later the same day.

**ACT II**

Scene 1: Morning, a few days later.

Scene 2: Later that night.

Scene 3: Two hours later.

Scene 4: Early the next morning.

Scene 5: Later the same day.

**Collective Voice/Song**

After creating a visual structure of the plot, I read the text multiple times, at least once for each character in the story, taking the time to experience the play from each perspective. I used these readings as opportunities to highlight the text, indicating breath marks and line enjambments. I view the text as one long poem, similar to that of a Shakespearean play. Through this reflection, I am able to get a sense of the different voices, see how the language intersects, and how relationships are formed.
August Wilson writes with a poetic pulse influenced and informed by the Blues. During my first Wilsonian theatrical experience in *The Piano Lesson* under the direction of Professor Kashi Johnson at Lehigh University, I was led to investigate the text like that of a musical score, interpreting each character’s voice as a different instrument. Each instrument was to be an extension of the character’s point of view, providing insight into their particular contribution to the song or to serve as their character melody.

For my process, it is essential that I know the song in its entirety in order to prepare to sing my part in harmony with Wilson’s blues-inspired, poetic use of language. Knowledge of the bigger picture is especially important for a character like Black Mary, who is present throughout many of the scenes, but her contribution is not always verbal. When she does interject herself into the conversation, the cadence of speech should not call attention to itself, but rather read as an integrated component of the poetic textual experience.

Similar to the rhythm required to perform a Shakespearean play, August Wilson’s canon is constructed to be delivered in a holistic and collective vocal style, creating an aria of the African-American tradition of oral storytelling in one soul-filled song.

**Language**

“Allow the language to work for you. Take your time and connect with your ancestors. It is your blood memory, listen and allow it to flow through you.”

-Dr. Pinkney, *Gem of the Ocean* rehearsal, August 2011

Pinkney could be heard echoing the words as if it were a sermon, emphasizing the importance of the relationship between the actor and the text of August Wilson.
Reading or performing *Gem of the Ocean* is a language-driven experience. It is poetry and requires a well-trained voice to execute it with proficiency, a feat similar to that of performing Shakespeare. The action of the play is in the relationships and the storytelling. The conversations are entertainment and therefore, language serves as an important art form and it functions as an oral history and re-membering or re-memory.

Pinkney preached that

> there is a lusciousness in the joy of speaking. What does each word mean? You must take your time because you are telling history. This [*Gem of the Ocean*] is a sermon and you can’t rush a sermon. Done right and the audience will amen, responding ‘this is speaking to me.’

The goal with the language is to find the weight, imagery, cadence, and comfort. *Gem of the Ocean* is not a contemporary text. The focus must be to train yourself to see the memories and paint the picture for all to share. Pinkney reminded us that “we have time. Let’s not go too fast. If you eat too fast you lose the taste and the deliciousness of the meal. It’s the difference between high fire and keeping the fire low, a generational thing.” The room fills with laughter, aware of the constant battle between Black Mary and Aunt Ester about the fire level on the stove.

**Lessac Voice**

Truly fine poetry must be read aloud. A good poem does not allow itself to be read in a low voice or silently. If we can read it silently, it is not a valid poem: a poem demands pronunciation. Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art. It remembers that it was first song.

- Jorge Luis Borges, *Seven Nights*

Borges text echoes Dr. Pinkney’s appreciation for language as an oral art, and in order to convey the musical poetry of August Wilson I relied upon my Lessac voice.
training. The Lessac voice training is a technique of investigating language on a micro-level, engaging the vowels and consonants to enhance communication and expression. My process of using the Lessac system begins by marking all of the breath-marks, circling punctuation, commas, semi-colons, etc. and placing a line at the end of sentences. Punctuation provides the road map, indicating where breaths can be taken. To ensure that all sentences are continued from one line to the next without adding an artificial pause, I connected the lines by marking the enjambment, a text analysis technique acquired from working with Shakespearean text.

After using pencil to indicate the breath-marks and enjambment, I then moved on to explore the consonants. Consonants are important as they provide the structure and meaning within language whereas the vowels supply the emotion or feeling. Playable consonants are marked with a double line indicating a possibility to elongate the sound (but only if supported by imagination and imagery to avoid a mechanical interpretation of sound extension), and plosives are marked with a single line. Exploration of the consonants allows me to identify poetic patterns such as alliteration and antithesis that can be helpful when trying to memorize lines, as well as finding additional ways to texturize the language.

The marking of the consonants is followed by identifying the vowels. The Lessac system requires marking each vowel with a corresponding number that correlates to the size of the mouth opening and the sound generated. The vowels, also known as structure, provide an opportunity to connect with an emotion and project using tone to fill a large space. The vocal markings require a time-commitment, but I find the more
energy I am able to spend deconstructing the language, the better I equip myself with more possibilities for creativity when I begin to engage the words accompanied with the imagery.

The next step with the vocal markings involves exploring and identifying operative words. During conversation and daily communication, an individual is able to convey one central idea or focus within a sentence. With text analysis, operative work is the concept of choosing one idea that would be emphasized within the thought phrase. When identifying an operative word, the process begins by stressing the first word in the line, then reading the line again and stressing the second word of the sentence, and so on and so forth until each word has been explored as an operative. This exercise is instrumental in adding depth to the lines, because those words not chosen as the operative have still been engaged during the rehearsal process. After exploring all the words in the line and deciding upon the choice of operatives, I then put focus toward the verbs, as they are indicators of doing and taking action.

Each day before rehearsal, I reviewed my lines onstage. My goal was to explore the full range of Black Mary by pushing my creativity with the language above and beyond in rehearsal and practice so that when we were on stage in the Constans Theatre, I would be able to project to the last row of seats with a sense of ease. A well-trained voice requires similar maintenance and training to that of an athlete. Athletes train rigorously so that when it is time to compete no thinking in necessary -- the actions have become part of the body sense memory. In addition, if an athlete fails to train consistently, they may fall short when it comes to competing as they have failed to put in the time and effort needed to succeed. I view my relationship with my voice training in
the same fashion. Getting ill, losing your voice, and inconsistent vocal performances are
the signs of an untrained actor. Only if you are spending time strengthening your
instrument and committing the actions to body memory, will you have more control over
the sounds your instrument can generate. Too often, I witness actors holding back or
waiting until opening night to bring their full self to their vocal work and by that time, it is
already too late.

Lessac voice guidelines suggest that one should avoid stressing the first letter of
each word within a sentence to prevent the creation of an irregular vocal pattern. The
following excerpt illustrates the vocal markings when this guideline is ignored:

“I don’t know what he done. All I know he say he ready to go.”

[Underline: indicates stress/emphasis/elongation of the letter supported with imagery.]
(Gem of the Ocean, act 2, scene 2)

The choice to stress the first letter of every word is conflicting and dissonant to
the natural iambic pentameter, (unstressed/stressed) speech pattern of American
English. The sentence below has been adjusted to reflect the iambic pentameter stress
pattern:

“I don’t know what he done. All I know he say he ready to go.”

[Bold: indicates stress/emphasis/elongation of the letter supported with imagery.]

The second example of iambic pentameter follows the ‘duh-da duh-da duh-da,’
double note pattern that is most commonly associated with the American English vocal
cadence. Shakespeare presents a textual style that demands formal scanning of the
language to ensure that the actor is working with the text and not against its intended
rhythmic form. This same attention to language is vital to perform any of the works of August Wilson’s canon.

August Wilson is highly regarded for his ability to capture the voice of a people, from his many years as a youth hanging around barber shops, corner stores, and social institutions, such as the Crawford Grill in Pittsburgh’s once booming Hill District. Wylie Avenue was a famous street in the Hill District that once thrived with black businesses. Following the oral tradition of storytelling that he grew up consuming, Wilson’s text is the aria of a griot bursting at the seams with imagery, lying and sanctifying, spirituality, history, and re-memory.

Much like the Shakespearean actor who relies upon vocal training to command the language, a Wilsonian actor is in need of the same heightened attention to the spoken word. Phylicia Rashad, renown for portraying the role of Aunt Ester Tyler in the Broadway run of Gem of the Ocean, once commented on the power of Wilson’s language, noting that his words required both technical proficiency and surrender. This is a shared concept with the Lessac voice system, in that an actor will mark the script and explore the vocal possibilities, doing all the work to then ‘let it go’ at the end, trusting and surrendering to the text and the spirit of the work.

The communication of language requires an actor to speak in thoughts and discover the words as they are spoken. The ability to see, taste, and experience the words through one’s imagination adds to the orchestration of language and information that can be conveyed through the speaking of a word. However, this texturizing of the language can only occur in conjunction with attention paid to the technical aspect of the
text including comprehension of plot/relationships, awareness of the consonants and vowels, and firm command over the construction of the word order.

The excerpt of text is the letter that Solly Two Kings asks Black Mary to read during *Gem of the Ocean*, act 1, scene 1 with vocal markings [pg 59]. Reading a letter aloud on-stage called for some texturizing unlike a monologue. The letter had to be read aloud as a narrator, from a neutral perspective, allowing the listeners the chance to absorb and respond to the information being reported without emotional sway. The reading also had to be labored with real-time comprehension for a young woman, most likely self-educated, and the only reader of the house. In addition, the letter recitation required weighted description, clear distinction for the introduction of new thoughts, people, places, and events all conveyed with the voice. Although it may be ill-advised to stress or emphasis the first letter of each word; that does not mean that these first letters should be overlooked. There is a wealth of additional information that can be provided from exploring these letters vocally while supporting the word with imagery.

Highlighting the first letter of words allowed me to explore the alliteration within the lines. The use of that poetic device provides a natural emphasis for the language:

“The people are having a hard time with freedom. I can’t hold on here anymore.”

The ‘H’ is a whispered consonant, a sound effect. The embellishment of the ‘H’ as a sound effect and endowed with imagery, conveys the heavy burden and struggle being endured by Eliza Jackson and others suffering from racial oppression, through the breathy, aspiration of the ‘H’. The ‘H’ sound effects whispers to the vowel that follows and the use of vowels allows for the tone of emotion.
As well as recognizing patterns within the language, identifying words that are used multiple times throughout the text provides additional information and insight into that character's specific voice. For instance, repetitive words are intentional and each time the word is spoken, it must be endowed with a different connotation to express an additional meaning.

III. REHEARSAL PROCESS

Acting is Doing

The Freytag and Lessac markings help to understand the flow of action on stage and provide the framework for the action required within each scene. Black Mary is the domestic of the sanctuary at 1839 Wylie Avenue. Responsible for the cooking, cleaning, laundry, assisting Eli, and studying under the tutelage of Aunt Ester, she serves as an active type of mortar to the plotline. As the play progresses, the text indicates how Black Mary, although not always speaking, keeps the action together through her domestic duties and spiritual obligations. Acting is doing: the use of props; movement within the space; the focus of attention; and the ownership of costume can assist in the creation of character and deepen the levels of expressive life that can be enacted on stage.

From the first day of rehearsal, it was imperative that I began working with set, props and costumes. There was much stage life of the character to be created as Black Mary plays an integral part in the unscripted action of the play. The text provides what action is occurring on the stage when it is happening. For example, in act 1, scene 3,
Black Mary enters from outback asking, “You want a bowl of beans Solly?” This information allows me to create the circumstances that motivate the question to Solly and make the timing of the action fit within the lines of the text.

The text analysis included creating the moment before and delivering the lines within a logical action sequence. Aunt Ester and Black Mary had just been outside putting pure (manure) into the garden. In order to prepare to serve beans to Solly, the action included: entering the house; catching Mr. Citizen’s eye again to continue a connect initiated upon the exit out back which is an example of directing focus and meaning; washing and drying hands; moving over to the coatrack near the front door to return a cloak; putting on an apron; getting a towel to lift the hot lid on the pot and a serving spoon for the beans; serving the plate; then grabbing a cup and reaching for the water in the icebox.

Trial and error was the best approach to getting the timing of actions in sync with the delivery of text in positions where I could be both seen and heard on stage. The set included a functional water-pump for hand washing, cooking, and dishwashing. In addition, there was food and liquid being consumed by actors on stage so the use and maintenance of props on set was more intricate and labor intensive. After each rehearsal, I would take notes as to what worked and where the problem areas still remained. By dedicating myself to submerging myself in the day to day duties of a domestic worker, I was able to work with Pinkney to integrate a series of actions that were not included in the text but served as means to bring the house and its activities to life on stage.
Additional activities included kneading and baking biscuits, mending Solly’s pants before laundering, tending to the wood in the bottom of the fire-stove, moisturizing Aunt Ester’s feet with salve after washing her feet, then the spiritual protection of the house with salt in the doorways and window seals.

The logical order of action on stage needed to sustain a life-filled environment can only be created once the text is analyzed. I spent time creating an intricate properties list, devoted time to set-up the set (specifically the kitchen), gathered and preset property items, and costume pieces prior to each rehearsal. Aware that the organization of props would require a team effort with the crew and stage management, I began engaging our stage management in the conversation early so we could all stay on the same page. Organization was the best methodology I devised to approach what could have seemed like a daunting task. During rehearsal, I wrote down the order of action on stage when it was successful and highlighted problem areas. I reviewed each scene after rehearsal and thought of a different approach to the problem, then revisited the changes before running the scene again in rehearsal. By staying on top of solving on-stage issues on my own, I had a greater sense of ownership over the material and was able to answer questions posed by Pinkney about the needs of the kitchen.

**Costume**

From the first day of rehearsal, I had props pulled and a period style costume of heeled boots, long skirt, corset, and apron to begin building the physical life of the character on stage. There was much to be created in the onstage life of the character, and the sooner I was able to mark through the actions, the sooner I would be able to
make multi-tasking look effortless on stage while enacting the daily duties of Black Mary.

By providing my own costume, I was able to be innovative with my creativity and hit the ground running working within the informative confines of the period style garments. The inclusion of the apron allowed Pinkney to begin a conversation early in the process in terms of when he wanted the apron on and off, a dialogue that would continue throughout technical rehearsal. Bringing a purse and cloak helped with the timing of entrances and exits.

The use of these costume items early in the process also helped facilitate constructive conversations with the costume design team in terms of being able to express the physical demands and costume needs of the character as blocked by Pinkney. The frequent removal and replacement of the apron required a change in the design regarding how the apron was tied. The initial design tied from behind. However, when it came to usage, circling the tie around to the front allowed for a more convenient and complimentary solution. In addition, we were able to find a solution to fulfill the need of having to roll and un-roll the sleeves of the blouse for water usage and cooking. After trying several ideas, the costume team decided upon button’s with elastic clasps for easy sleeve use. My proactive approach to my costume led to the facilitation of a creative dialogue to create a fashionable and functional solution to the character’s needs and specific staging for our production.
Set of 1839 Wylie Avenue

Black Mary was a resident and caretaker of the house, and consequently the creation of her character also required a relationship with the house of sanctuary as she would be Aunt Ester’s spiritual and cultural successor. I would attend each rehearsal early (at least an hour and a half) and with permission of the stage design team, warm-up in the space. After the physical and vocal warm-up, my routine consisted of walking through the space with blocking notes in hand, miming the use of props when needed, and speaking all of my lines aloud.

With regard to the set and Black Mary’s consistent presence in the kitchen, special attention had to be paid to sight lines regarding use of the stove placed upstage left center and the sink snugly located in the upstage left corner. The challenge was using the space in a functional manner and making the slight cheat out of my body to face toward the audience seem natural. There were several initial locations for the functional water pumping sink and working with Pinkney we discovered the best locale for the sink so that it would be used and still be part of the theatrical experience.

In addition to familiarizing myself with the potential areas for upstaging myself, I had to find ease in arranging the furniture in the dining area, using the drawer downstage right next to Aunt Ester’s chair and the routine of attending to the bureau by the upstage right front window, as well as exhibiting a proficient use of all of the exits (front/back door, hallway, Aunt Ester’s room and the upstairs entry to the additional bedrooms, including becoming acclimated with the staircase.

While working in the space, I paid particular attention to traversing about on stage in serpentine movements to make the most of the costume and support the period
style of 1904. University of Florida SOTD Professor and internationally recognized producer, director and teacher, Dr. Judith Williams noted, “the curvilinear movements [of your Black Mary character portrayal] seemed in opposition to the domestic function of the character’s expected efficiency of movement, but it added a sense that Mary was destined for more important things, as the protégé of Aunt Ester.” Once there was a familiarization created with the structural aspects of the house, I could engage with the set on a different level to find and explore functional, symbolic, and more interesting movements.

There is not much time allotted in rehearsal for running a scene multiple times, therefore I found great comfort in being able to work in the space on my own time, reassured that I was comfortable with all the aspects of the space and furniture. The familiarity of the set was important to convey Black Mary’s residence in the home and role as domestic house-keeper.

IV. CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

SANKOFA

One of the characteristics of the Wilson canon is the universal quandary of negotiating one’s past and moving forward towards one’s future. The conflict often revolves around a need for recognition of self that is achieved when a character is able to acknowledge and make peace with their past in order to receive what is intended for their future.
From the deep and near South the sons of daughters of newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned, their heart kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive carrying Bibles and guitars, their pockets lined with dust and fresh hope, marked men and women seeking to scrape from the narrow, crooked cobbles and the fiery blasts of the coke furnace a way of bludgeoning and shaping the malleable parts of themselves into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth.

Foreigners in a strange land, they carry as part and parcel of their baggage a long line of separation and dispersement which informs their sensibilities and marks their conduct as they search for ways to reconnect, to reassemble, to give clear and luminous meaning to the song which is both a wail and a whelp of joy (Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Introduction, August Wilson).

Having been abducted from their African roots and transplanted in America where they were stripped of their cultural practices, African-Americans search for identity often involves a duality of back-tracking to African origins and then the responsibility to name oneself in order to more forward and progress. August Wilson understood the struggle to hold on to the past while simultaneously seeking a new future and its relevance to the creation of community for African-Americans.

This search for awareness through the past is closely related to the concept of sankofa, a symbol of the West African Akan language, whose English meaning translates as “to return and fetch it” (Sankofa). Sankofa is emblazoned as the Adinkra symbol of a bird flying forward with its head facing backwards, the egg is representative of the gift or gem of knowledge being provided for the next generation. The pan-African spirituality of Wilson’s plays lives in the Sankofa symbol and served as a vehicle for me to find significance in the portrayal of my character that was influenced and invigorated by the blood memory of my ancestors.
Sankofa is the wisdom of learning from the past to build one’s future and is associated with the proverb “Se wo were fi na wasandofa a yenkyi,” that translates as “It is not wrong to go back for that which you have forgotten” (“Sweet Chariot”). The ideology of Sankofa is interwoven in the personal conflicts of the Wilsonian characters. For instance, Herald Loomis of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone is haunted by his history of kidnapping and enslavement for seven years and the consequential loss of his family. Loomis migrates North to find the mother of his daughter Zonia, but he is also running from his past. Through the spiritual leadership of root-working, Bynum, a spiritual keeper similar to that of Aunt Ester in Gem of the Ocean, Herald Loomis is able to face his paralyzing past and reclaim his song to live when he once was a man who had forgotten how to touch and who was without a future.

In our production of Gem of the Ocean, Pinkney’s concept was to highlight the plight of young Citizen Barlow in his time of manhood initiation and search for self. Our job as supporting characters in this vision was to develop strong definable relationships and a clear sense of our characters throughout the play.

After analyzing the text using the Freytag, I was able to work through the plot to discover the character arc of Black Mary. Citizen Barlow undergoes a change as the play progresses similar to the transformation of self that Black Mary experiences. The following explores how I discovered Black Mary's character journey.

Black Mary and Surrender

In act 1, scene1, Solly Two Kings describes the character stating that “Black Mary Stubborn” (Gem 17). It is a trait that she shares with her brother Caesar Wilks and
although she does not possess the evilness of her brother, the family trait of stalwartness impedes with her discovery of self and purpose.

“Very little grows on jagged rock
Be ground.
Be crumbled, so wildflowers
Will come up where you are.
You've been stony for too many years.
Try something different.
Surrender.” (Rumi)

The excerpt from *A Necessary Autumn* by Rumi was a poem introduced by Dr. David Young during our creative process class. The poem was utilized as a reminder that we, as artists, must be malleable and embrace change, as it is part of the evolving artistic process. At times this change may require letting go of past or habitual behaviors. The need for surrender associated with my creative process seemed infused in Black Mary’s function within the play and parallel to the surrender that Citizen Barlow discovers in the City of Bones.

Although Black Mary arrives at the sanctuary of Aunt Ester to heal her heart from multiple failed attempts at love and to seek refuge, as the play begins Black Mary is tough and seemingly resistant to attempts to reach her. Black Mary shares a realization with Citizen in act 2, scene 3 when she states “[y]ou got to be right with yourself before you can be right with anybody else” (*Gem 73*). *Gem of the Ocean* reflects her journey to be right with herself. Although she first seeks change through external factors, through the course of the play her character evolves by confronting her past, asserting herself in her present situation, and then situating herself for a future.
I organized Black Mary’s character arc through her relationships of past, present, and future [pg 60, 61]. The past was represented through her relationship with her brother, Caesar Wilks, the local constable, the present relationship was Black Mary’s tutelage under spiritual leader, Aunt Ester, and the future was reflected through her new relationship with Citizen Barlow.

A thorough analysis of the text revealed that the most transformational speeches from Black Mary include: the confession to Citizen Barlow in the kitchen after he asks her to come to his room that night (act 1, scene 4); the declaration to Aunt Ester over the stove at the end of play (act 2, scene 3); and the statement of banishment to Caesar over the recently deceased Solly Two Kings (act 2, scene 5).

In act 1, scene 2, Aunt Ester speaks of the dream she has of Black Mary arriving with her seventeen rings. Black Mary’s monologue to Mr. Citizen names some of these past loves:

“Leroy. And John. And Cujoe. And Sam. And Robert. One after the other they come and they go. You can’t hold on to none of them. They slip right through your hands. They use you up and you can’t hold on to them” (Gem 43).

This is her confession of hurt and the rationalization behind her hardened demeanor to Mr. Citizen’s peaked interest in her and his sexual advances:


Here, Black Mary is testing him, inquiring what it is exactly that Mr. Citizen seeks to gain from their companionship. Earlier, in act 1, scene 2, Black Mary and Citizen share a
stolen moment of lustful eye contact but before she can proceed, possibly putting her heart in jeopardy, she has to confess her fears, name them and move past them.

The second significant moment of change occurs when Black Mary stands up to Aunt Ester defending her way of cooking, cleaning and taking care of the house in act 2, scene 3:

   It’s been three years now I can’t do nothing to satisfy you. I may as well lay down somewhere and forget about it. You got something to say about everything. … I got my own way and that’s the way I’m doing it. If I stay around here I’m doing it my own way (Gem 74).

This moment represents her reclamation of self as a capable and reliable contributor to the household without question. She has not only created a reputation through her hard work and dedication but now, through this monologue, she has named herself as having her own identity. Aunt Ester, who has been anticipating Black Mary’s next step in her transformation, replies to Black Mary’s declaration by simply stating, “What took you do long?” (Gem 74).

Finally, Black Mary acknowledges her past and chooses to divorce it for a new future when she denounces Caesar as her brother in act 2, scene 5. Prior to this moment, Black Mary was attempting to defend her brother in his absence, but his treachery and spitefulness over the death of Solly crossed the line, violating Black Mary’s sanctuary family. In her final words to Caesar, she looks back on their shared history and the man she remembered him to be. Then she confronts him in the present tense stating “I don’t know who you are. But you not my brother.” (Gem 84). This final declaration of independence and severance from her past was only possibly through her self-awareness and desire to change. By showing up at the sanctuary and then
embracing the lessons that Aunt Ester has to offer, Black Mary becomes right with herself. With the last, longing look into Citizen Barlow’s eyes as he dresses with Solly’s coat, hat, and stick and leaves the house to return South to embrace his destiny, we can only assume that when Citizen Barlow returns to Wylie Avenue, they can be right with one another.

**Being Verses Showing**

Black Mary is described as being stubborn and Dr. Pinkney described Black Mary as a pot of boiling water. Although she may not speak often, Black Mary is always “going off” in her head, monologue-ing to herself about how she feels, similar to the water bubbling below the lid of the boiling pot. The challenge with her character would be pushing all of the words, feelings, and impulses down and swallowing them until she is given the opportunity to speak and react. There is always more happening below the surface with her. Even a simple task may be enacted as her true feelings kick and punch beneath the surface.

For the first several weeks of rehearsal, I fought with myself in an attempt to accurately embody the no-nonsense attitude of Black Mary Wilks. The pattern I found myself in was constantly wearing a face of scorn to illustrate the character’s disposition. I found both exhausting (as it requires more facial muscles to frown than smile) and limiting in my character’s growth and development.

The following is a journal entry of 8/26/11:

*Observation:* tired, tired, tired. Wearing Black Mary’s hard frozen face and heart I can feel the tears welling below the surface. Am I in a bad mood or is this an extension of Black Mary’s disposition? Don’t know what is wrong with me – just received a positive note and yet tears still well in my eyes. I feel tired and USED.
Unappreciated. Black Mary or Teniece? Does it even matter? Feel trapped/punished in Black Mary’s character. Discovery: Despite her hardened demeanor – Black Mary cries herself to sleep at night. Still seeking love.

The making faces or posing was a pattern of behavior that I engaged in when acting prior to Gem of the Ocean, so I sought out assistance from one of my professors to help me overcome this seemingly habitual over-efforting. By working with Alexander Technique instructor, Kathy Sarra, I was able to relieve myself of the obligation of showing the audience how tormented Black Mary was and allowed myself to be submerged in the situation. Initially, the change in my approach made me feel like I was not doing enough, because I was no longer fatigued by holding onto that attitude.

Once I was able to let go of the face of scorn, I discovered many more possible reactions from a neutral face and the changes led to the creating of different levels within Black Mary’s stubbornness. The key was accepting that stereotypes may be useful as a starting point, but to relegate a character to just one generalized disposition limits the degrees of expression. Just as an actor may choose to incorporate playing the opposite in a scene, the same type of exploration holds true to a label such as stubborn. When I was are able to move past the generalization that stubbornness equated to a scowl, I then discovered that it might be possible to be stubborn while wearing a light-hearted smile and laughing. By relieving myself of the obligation of showing emotions and attending to the situation at hand, I felt a freedom in just being. It is the job and challenge of an actor to go beyond generalizations, let go of the first good idea, and trust oneself to explore for new possible means of expression.
Blood Memory

Black Mary stands for an archetype of a domestic woman, head down and silently humming her bluesy interpretation of Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” in her search for identity and place in the world. She represents the heritage of women as daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, domestics, and sexual objects. This legacy of Black women is a past that cannot be ignored. A shared bond exists between the Black women who have forged the path to give women, such as myself, an educated Black woman of the twenty-first century, a voice. Toni Morrison’s quote from Beloved further explicates the connection of blood memory when she writes

“You rememory me?
Yes. I remember you.
You never forget me?
Your face is mine” (Morrison 249).

Zora Neale Hurston described the oppressive duality of gender and race of Black women noting that they are, “de mule uh de world,” alluding to the dual-oppression endured as Black women [who] invisibly suffer in the euro-centric patriarchy that is America (Hurston 18). These cultural reminders serve only to reinforce the magnitude of Black Mary’s function within the play and the importance of accessing re-memory of the past to inform and texturize my performance.

As I toiled preparing props before, during, and after rehearsals, I would often become overwhelmed. Incorrectly timing props while wearing a corset and heels, I was frustrated, tired, and silent. I thought of the black women who have paved the path to my current state of independence as a black woman in America. I thought of countless women who would have traveled on foot with children or searching for lost husbands as
they traveled up North, only to find similar situations of oppression based on skin color and female gender inequity. Many died struggling so that I could have a voice. It was an emotional, honoring, and humbling discovery that deepened my love and appreciation for the work of August Wilson.

The following is a journal entry of 8/19/10:

– physical exhaustion. Find Boundaries – push to find out of bounds. No days off – push to exhaustion; training → discover spirituality emotional connection. "act 1 kicked my a**. So many props to set and stage business to attend to. SCORN + WORK = Black Mary. It’s part of our heritage. It’s in you. Challenge yourself to get out of the way. Blood memory KUNTU: cosmic and spiritual connection. act 2, scene 5 discovered Solly’s spirit endowed in Black Mary. ‘I’m done. We’re done.’ [to Caesar]

Gem of the Ocean is theatrical journey of two acts, and ten scenes with high demands physically, vocally, and spiritually for an actor. Building my stage endurance was an integral part of my rehearsal process and an aspect of my leadership contribution. The days were not always easy, but I found that when I was feeling tired, I focused my energy on how the women who came before me lived this experience. Through rigorous training and spiritual connection to my ancestors, I gained more ownership over my character, felt more comfortable with the flow of the storyline, and was able to accomplish more with greater ease. Specifically, my acting process consisted of physical and vocal warm-ups, presetting of props and costumes, review of previous rehearsal's notes, line-run and mark through blocking scheduled scenes, and detailed note-taking after scenes.
In addition to the daily actor responsibilities, I was accountable for discovering the complex character of Black Mary. From a technical perspective, the stage life of the character was extensive including operating an onstage water pump, tending to the stove fire, chopping and serving food, as well as reading and writing letters. The organized and determined manner with which I approached the on-stage business allowed me to easily adjust during tech week when I was given the task of restoring the set and putting props away at the close and top of scenes, as Black Mary was on stage a majority of the play.

**Ancestors**

‘Language should be slow and sure, allowing for depth. Call on our ancestors. Listen. It’s intuition; our blood memory. We will find the rhythm and pace of the show so don’t be afraid of the silence because what’s living in the silence is palpable.’ – Dr. Mikell Pinkney, *Gem of the Ocean* rehearsal, August 2011

My vocal process is formulated and prescribed and often I am most challenged by the fear of letting go. Consequently, I prefer to over-prepare and find freedom within the comfort of knowing the text. Early in the rehearsal process, Pinkney approached me about Black Mary’s voice. He said that the register that I was working in, my lower third, was good placement but he noted that I sounded too educated. Although Black Mary is the only reader in the house, her proficiency is not that of a college graduate, and thus her speech pattern needed to be adjusted to fit the character.

I used it as an opportunity to surrender to the language as Phylicia Rashad had advised with the spiritual support of my ancestors. The only way I could fully attend to the challenge at hand would be with passionately detailed work and surrender to a
collective power greater than myself, my blood memory. This was the work being
recorded in my journal and onstage the realization added to the quality of my vocals,
stemming from a sense of confidence and trust.

**Final Monologue**

Mary’s final realization concerning her brother is reflected by journal 8/17/11.

Discovery! last monologue: little girl. I must disown. He must hear me. Vulnerability. No walls left standing. The only thing that could GET Caesar is BLACK MARY. (removal of his self-respect.) Last speech – she's ready.

This rehearsal discovery was pivotal in the development of that final Black Mary monologue to her brother Caesar. It was the first time that Black Mary broke and a softer, compassionate, and more gracious side was revealed from beneath her grizzled and stubborn demeanor. The “little girl” association felt like a reclamation of innocence, as if Black Mary had finally absolved herself from her past wrong-doings. Once free of guilt, she is able to stop concealing her shame and decide for herself how her future will continue. Her journey is complete as she has finally found her voice free of her brother’s corruption.

It is important to fight for the objective in a monologue. This specified focus assists the actor to stay the course in the face of emotion. It is not necessary for an actor to emote in order to elicit a cathartic response from an audience and this fight to create emotion within the actor can lead a monologue astray by having it become too personal and internal when the ultimate goal must be to communicate. The drama
unfolds for an audience in watching a character overcome their emotions as they continue to strive to achieve their objective.

Although this was the first time I found a new sense of comfort in the monologue, this revelation led to a conflict I encountered and one that is experienced by many actors. It is the idea of holding on to an idea and attempting to repeat a once-euphoric eureka moment of yesterday. It was not until much later in the process during tech week that I was able to transcend my own preconceived limitations. By letting go of the idea that Black Mary has reverted to an earlier state of naivety and become a little girl again, I was able to acknowledge that she is not regressing to her past but rather, she has experienced a change into womanhood rid of childhood obligations. Her newly acquired sense of self was a more active state of being to fight for. It was alive with the conflict of disowning one’s past and remembering her blood family. She has experienced a metamorphic reincarnation into a woman poised and ready to fulfill her destiny to her larger blood family, as heir to the cultural spiritualist, Aunt Ester.

Hindsight provided me with the perspective that the discovery of Black Mary’s innocence was a needed part of my process. It marked a day where I was vulnerable enough with the material to reveal an inner love within Black Mary. The next step of working the act 2, scene 5 monologue was trying and frustrating. After multiple attempts at reworking my approach, I eventually let the monologue go from my to do list with the intention of coming back to it at a later date or when I had to, whichever came first.

The costume (specifically the corset) aided in the stifling of the words and physicality of Black Mary that could be internalized as a combination of Laban efforts called wringing. The journal entry of 8/12/11 reflects this inner conflict of the character.
[Black Mary is on stage often without speaking.] Black Mary – focused. In the room and always listening. Monologues [are] in her head. Challenged to ‘keep the lid on.’ Her emotions are hot and dangerous like a pot of boiling water that must be contained, part of her training process is that she must deal with her own demons.

The physical choice of wringing was internal and through rehearsal this built up tension that could be integrated with the text, similar to the effect of boiling water, adding texture to the character.

An additional means of communication included the use of props. The hand towel is endowed with more of a psychological power, an extension of Black Mary’s character and her ability to communicate her unspoken feelings. Snapping it around while cleaning when she is frustrated and almost petting or stoking the towel in times of contemplation, the towel is an extension of her internal turmoil when no dialogue is scripted.

**Finding My Song**

Wilson says:
“You have to believe that you can dive off a cliff and that you’ll be okay, that you’ll sprout wings and you’ll fly. Otherwise you’ll never dive off the cliff.” Journal 8/9/11.

Although I remember singing in the choir in fifth grade and even surprising my classmates while singing a solo in sixth grade, I branded myself a non-singer, a self-imposed disadvantage as a performer. The thought of having to sing on stage, which is often a requirement in the works of August Wilson, was exhilaratingly terrifying. In *Gem of the Ocean*, Black Mary not only participates in the harmony for the songs to the City
of Bones and the subsequent Juba that follows the journey, she leads the ensemble in singing “Twelve Gates to the City” as Mr. Citizen Barlow passes the Gate Keeper and first approaches the City of Bones illuminated in its full glory. The song is significant in that it is the first time that Black Mary has assisted in someone’s journey to the City with Aunt Ester’s permission. It also signifies a union between Citizen and Black Mary in their transformational journeys of self.

To combat my anxiety, I began working with the songs from the moment we received the compact disks from Pinkney. I relied upon my vocal training to find the confidence to sing in front of an audience. Again using the Lessac vocal markings, I identified the consonants and vowels in the lyrics. The consonants were essential in providing the information, whereas the vowels provided an opportunity to emote through imagery. Paying attention to the structure of my mouth would be valuable in maintaining form and holding notes.

Aware that nerves would create tension during the moment of truth, I spent time focusing in on my Alexander Technique. When I reminded myself of my primary control, the relationship between your head, neck, and spine, and turned into my body mapping (‘in, up, and forward’), I found additional length and space in my spine and ribs, allowing more of my breath to drop in. It was also important that I focus on breathing in and out with my diaphragm versus my chest while lifting my soft pallet. I addressed all of the above in the way of a physical check-list during my warm-ups for rehearsal. Most important in my process of singing, however, was freeing the spirit of my voice. Simply put, I needed to feel comfortable and enjoy the act so every rehearsal I would take stage as part of my warm-up in the empty theatre and sing envisioning faces, bodies,
and spiritual energy from the audience. Visualization and repetition aided in my process of gaining confidence.

By the end, we had recorded ourselves singing for additional sound cues and I was singing on stage with confidence. The Lessac voice training, Alexander Technique, and rehearsal allowed me to accomplish the challenge at hand.

V. PERFORMANCE

Salt Water and Sage

As part of our rehearsal process, Pinkney introduced the concept of a “community of seven,” a name to represent the union of each member of our ensemble. He expounded upon the unity noting that the success of our play depended on our ability to create, maintain and sustain a strong familial bond. Not only did Pinkney ask that we as a cast unite, throughout the creative process he implored that we connect with our ancestors, as our blood memory was the only way we would be able to bring the play to life for an audience.

The spiritual invitation by Pinkney was welcomed and interpreted by everyone in different ways, adding to the beauty in the creative process. For instance, Ryan Johnson (Eli) commented that he appreciated the brotherhood he was able to exercise in the text with his cast mates Reginald Wilson (Solly Two Kings) and Troy McCray (Citizen Barlow). Anedra Johnson (Aunt Ester Tyler) noted that for her, theatre was her service, comparable to a ministry, serving as an opportunity to reach the masses. And finally, Doug Rory Milliron (Rutherford Sellig) experienced a rebirth, being able to open
up an emotional block within himself to connect his acting craft to a spiritual or higher purpose as he sang and danced in our warm-up jubas. The experience was life-altering for all due to the spiritual bridge Pinkney provided for us; there was no way one could separate self, spirit, or community from the text of Wilson and the impact it was having beyond the confines of the stage.

During dress rehearsal Pinkney began to bless the performance space in preparation for our artistic journey. He brought a sea blue healing candle and prior to the beginning of rehearsal, he greeted each of us, connecting, and then had us bless the candle with our positive energy by touching the candle, very similarly to how Aunt Ester, Black Mary, and Mr. Citizen touch the candle before Mr. Citizen heads North in search of his “two pennies.” Mr. Citizen’s candle burned in the stained-glass window of Aunt Ester’s parlor above the altar, and our candle burned with a bundle of sage as Pinkney moved through the theatre before fight-call.

In the spirit of curiosity and armed with an innate connection to Black Mary, I found myself yearning to learn how to bless the space. Dr. Pinkney served as my spiritual mentor and I watched how he welcomed our ancestors into the space, asking for their blessings. During the show, I blessed the space with our healing candle and sage. The ritual was cleansing and I enjoyed how the process developed and transformed throughout the run. Dr. Heley Perez taught me that our ancestors appreciate song and encouraged me to hum, and Kathy Sarra reminded me to “notice what I notice” throughout the ritual, an Alexander movement technique to remain in the moment.
I would begin the ritual by saying hello to the creative spirit verbally, releasing anything that I may be feeling to get into the moment, then applying Florida water over my face, chest, back and arms. The process began in the dressing room -- lighting the candle and then the sage. I would traverse from the dressing room to the theatre space, moving aisle by aisle through the audience, moving on stage, backstage, and then to the entrances to the theatre where there was a tribute created for August Wilson. I hummed spirituals that I had never heard but flowed through me.

Whenever possible, I would engage each ensemble member and production member to sharing in this cleansing of sage, and then continue through the space. There was never a verbal exchange and the ritual was never premeditated, but it created a relationship that evolved throughout the run. As each person prepared for the performance, they all had their own contribution. Mine was meditation and spiritual invitation, and I welcomed the duty with an open heart. I developed a relationship with persons and places. Doorways, serving as passageways in or out, or to the past or present, were significant, as well as windows. On stage, I took time in each area unique to each actor, blending the backstage and onstage lives seamlessly. And finally, the areas of spiritual significance on set, the altar in the great room, the entrance to Aunt Ester’s Room, her chair, and around the carpet that concealed the compass built into the floor for the journey to the City of Bones.

I developed an almost out of body meditation that would prepare me for the journey our ‘community of seven’ was about to engage in through two acts of an August Wilson drama. For me, the ritual was essential to my acting process and spiritual health. The process always felt greater than myself and that obligation to give voice to these
characters, facilitated my ability to get out of my own way, surrendering to the story and serving as a vessel for the African-American spirit. The world of the play and “real life” were continuing to intertwine, strengthening the creative spirit of our ensemble.

August Wilson Symposium

During the Symposium for August Wilson and Spirituality hosted by the University of Florida as part of opening weekend, the cast was invited to lunch with all of the invited guests. It was a momentous occasion being able to perform for and then converse with an audience including New York producer, Woodie King Jr., scholar and teacher, Dr. Sandra Shannon and singer/actress, Ebony-JoAnn. Before the conclusion of lunch Mr. Woodie King and Ms. Ebony-JoAnn commented on my performance. King noted,

It’s not about anything other than being a good actress. You know, it’s like, I don’t know what it is Black Mary, but your voice. That voice, I keep using Spike Lee as an example because his sister talk just like you. And you’d get a lead in one of his films like that, (fist to table), you know. But he’s gonna offer you minimum. (Room laughs) That’s right, that’s right. (August Wilson Symposium, University of Florida, September 2011)

Ms. Ebony Jo-Ann continued,

He gets all his actors by paying them the minimum. I wanna piggy-back on that, your vocal quality, your blackness comes through. (Woodie ‘Right, right, right.’) It comes through in your vocal quality and that was what was so amazing to me when I saw the production last night. And I thoroughly enjoyed your work because of it.

And then you, you held on to your, your nativity, and a sense of the era that you were portraying. You had a worldliness as well as a, and I watched every one of your activities. You, I could tell that you lived in that house. And I loved that so much and I was eventually going to get an opportunity to say that to you, so I am telling you now.” (August Wilson Symposium, University of Florida, September 2011)
I was taken aback and left speechless. The goal of this production for me was to find my voice as an actor, and the verbal feedback regarding my vocal quality had me smiling from my heart. I can remember our vocal instructor, Yanci Bukovec, telling us in voice class, that if we put in the work studying and exploring the Lessac voice training as life training, that people will notice something special about our voices. He also commented that awed listeners may not be able to identify exactly what it is about our voice that is appealing, as it is the result of not only technical prowess through training, but also from an imaginative or creative surrender to the language.

In addition to comments about my vocal work, I received much feedback on the engagement and use of the props and set. Most people spoke about how I was always cooking or cleaning or doing something. Several people noted how at home I seemed in the space, a true testament to how a focus on creating relationship with the space can serve as priceless character work.

Conclusion

Like all provocative forms of expressive art, my creative process was constructed with contradictions. The yin and yang symbiosis of discipline and value of responding actively in the moment was an integral relationship for my process. In addition, a connection created with my Black ancestors allowed my realistic interpretation of the character of Black Mary to exist on a spiritual level as well.

I approached the character of Black Mary with an enthusiastic discipline. The text work, repetition, and exploration added to the detailed focus of my portrayal, similar to that of a trained athlete. Dr. Judith Williams commented that “often time your focus
helped to sharpen mine as an audience member.” Through my process with *Gem of the Ocean*, I was also able to enact the ideology that the actor’s currency is *being in the moment*. By letting go of the habit of posing or playing the quality of the character, I experienced more possibility working from a neutral face, a blank canvas painting moment to moment, a goal I had yet to achieve in my previous work. In addition, I was able to find my artistic voice, through the use of my vocal training and willingness to try despite my fears.

I attribute this newly experienced creative freedom to the detailed discipline with which I approached the role and the incorporation of spirituality in our creative process introduced by our director, Dr. Pinkney. I believe that there are many ways to tap into our creative wells, and just as athletes can benefit from changing up their training to engage different muscles, the same type of innovation can be instrumental in one’s creative exploration.

The textual analysis and research on August Wilson, his inspirations, and reading the Wilson ten-play canon, strengthened my understanding of the material, and broadened my historical perspective having myself grown up in Pittsburgh. Much of the backtracking and collection of information on the African-American experience in the early 1900s reminded me of Sankofa and the maxim that, one does not know where they are going unless they know from where they have come.
WORKS CITED


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THE PREVALENCE OF RITUAL: CONJUR WOMAN

PROLOGUE
(late night)

Citizen wants to see A. Ester.
Told to come back Tuesday.

ACT I

Scene One

Citizens standing outside / A. Ester in bed 4 days

SELBY arrives - mill is shut down.

ELI “ceasar chased Garrett BROWN into river”
over bucket of nails. BROWN’S funeral is today.Rev. Tillivers
SOLLY arrives, SELBY leaves.

ELI building a wall.

BLACKMARY reads ELLA JACKSON’S letter. “times are terrible”
SOLLY going SOUTH to get sister.

A dream of BLACK MARY’S 17 Birches, 3 yrs ago,
last time dream of SOLLY cycling stick going to ALABAMA.

ELI & SOLLY go to Garrett Brown’s funeral.

Scene Two

Citizen enters 1890s. Write A. Ester’s update window
waits for his soul washed & cant wait.

Citizen tells him from ALABAMA & that “He’s killed a man.”
A. Ester sings Citizen to sleep. He’ll stay to help build wall.

Scene Three

BLACKMARY & ELI questioned how Citizen got in the house:

SOLLY arrives. “Riot at the Mill” BLACKMARY reads ELLA
OBSESSION & she write ELI back for SOLLY.

ELI enters with CITIZEN. -he & BLACKMARY1 share.
SOLLY talks of name “Citizen,” stick carrying knives &
ALABAMA.
BLACKMARY “how of beans,” God am I ever wrong.

CEASAR interrogates Citizen. ELI takes Citizen to build wall,
SOLLY exits w/ walking stick.

BLACKMARY reveals Caesar. Killed a man over bread.

Scene Four

Aunt ELIZA & BLACKMARY discuss how Citizen got in.

CITIZEN offers himself to BLACKMARY... she conceals

Aunt ESTER tells of inheritance from MISTRESS &
censors BLACKMARY for turning from it.

CITIZEN confesses stealing bucket of nails
to A. Ester. “Story of Peter from Boston”
A. ESTER tells Citizen go up river to get
cometing from William Grant & find 2 pennies.

ELI enters. “Mill’s on fire.”

Created by Teniece Divya Johnson. August 2011.
ACT II

Scene ONE
(Morning after Hills on fire)

Scene TWO

Scene THREE

Scene FOUR

Scene FIVE

Created by Teniece Divya Johnson. August 2011.
Dear Solomon,

I am writing to let you know the times are terrible here. The most anybody remember since bondage. The people are having a hard time with freedom. I can’t hold on here anymore. The white peoples is gone crazy and won’t let anybody leave. They beat one fellow on the road so bad his mama say, “Who is he?” They killed some more and say the colored can’t buy any tickers on the train to get away. Say they will sink the ferry if any colored on it. I want to leave to come North but it is too bad. It is a hard time for everybody. Write and let me know what to do as I try to hold on but can’t.

Your loving sister,
Eliza Jackson
**BLACK MARY ACTION CHART**

**BLACK MARY WILK’S TURNS OF PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACT I</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scene 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notices Citizen Barlow standing across the street from the house.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Defends Caesar’s judgment during the altercation versus Garret Brown.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Notes disapproval to Aunt Ester about Citizen Barlow staying in the house.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moment of ‘eye contact’, interest or spark with Citizen.</td>
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<td>Scene 4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Stands up for Citizen during Caesar’s interrogation.</td>
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<td>Opposes Caesar telling him she prefers living at 1839 Wylie Ave. compared to living with him.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confronted with the legacy Aunt Ester wants to pass on and the resistance perceived from her.</td>
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Created by Teniece Divya Johnson. August 2011.
### ACT II

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scene 1</th>
<th>Reveals map with <em>City of Bones</em> location to Citizen Barlow.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scene 2</td>
<td>With Aunt Ester’s permission, assists Citizen when in peril during his journey to the <em>City of Bones</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 3</td>
<td>Protests to Aunt Ester that she got her ‘own way of doing things.’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“What took you so long.” – Aunt Ester, act 2, scene 3</td>
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<td>Scene 4</td>
<td>Disrespected by Caesar arresting Aunt Ester, despite protests that 1839 is a house of sanctuary.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Scene 5</td>
<td>Denounces Caesar as brother after assassination of Solly Two Kings.</td>
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Created by Teniece Divya Johnson. August 2011.
Teniece Divya Johnson, University of Florida, M.F.A

Teniece Divya [Da’VEE-ah] Johnson (Black Mary Wilks) fears stepping on other’s toes, but refuses to silence her voice. Inspired by those around her, she’s humbled by the responsibility and gift associated with being a theatre artist.

She is an activist, artist, dreamer, poet, and forever a student of life. Born a Georgia peach with her childhood spent in Pittsburgh, PA, Teniece is honored to enter her 3rd year as an MFA candidate at the University of Florida with the thesis role of Black Mary in August Wilson’s spiritually transcending and culturally uplifting Gem of the Ocean.

Prior to embarking on her MFA journey, she was a Division I athlete, playing basketball for Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA. She became a LU alum twice over with a degree in Marketing and a Masters in Sociology. A community activist and co-founder of Redsun Productions, she is proud that 2011 marks the fifth anniversary of Redsun’s HipHopCollective and the graduation of the fourth hip hop generation, Elemental 4.0 of Lehigh University. For Teniece, theatre has been a means to connect and give voice to people, in true griot style, sharing the stories that create community and culture.

While at the University of Florida she has had the opportunity to engage in the creation of several devised theatre pieces including Signs of Life – Speaktactics and Legends, a movement intensive with Professor Tiza Garland. After spending two weeks
in Rugerero, Rwanda, with genocide survivors she returned to work alongside Dr. Mikell Pinkney in the creation of Where Can We Run?; Aim for Africa in July of 2009.

Other stage credits include The Piano Lesson (Berniece), Polaroid Stories (Persephone/Semele), Pride and Prejudice (Mrs. Gardenier), Faculty Room (Zoe), Macbeth (Witch), Pillowman (Detective Ariel), and In the Blood (Hester LaNegrita). Regional stage appearances include A Christmas Carol and Dead Man's Cell Phone (The Other Woman). In the summer of 2010 she completed her first international tour with UF’s production of A Streetcar Named Desire (Stella) performing in Hamburg, Germany, as well as Brno and Prague in the Czech Republic.

During her M.F.A. internship she worked at The Forum Theatre in Silver Springs, M.D. under the artistic direction of Michael Dove and with the Legacy Theatre in New York with producer Lorna Littleway. While in Maryland Teniece participated on the Forum’s play reading committee, served as a reader at the Roundhouse Theatre, and performed in Chatterbox (Matilda) as part of the Forum’s Re(Act)ion series in conjunction with the Forum’s production of Namoi Wallace’s One Flea Spare. While in New York, she interned at the first annual Juneteenth Legacy Theatre New Plays Festival and worked as a stage manager for Diana Sands, directed by Sue Lawless, and starring Tony-nominated Hope Clark. She also stage managing for Young Fredrick Douglas directed by Peter Zazzallli and performed as a reader in 1000 miles (Ellen Craft), the historical account of a slave passing as a white man so that she and her husband could escape slavery, directed by Allie Woods.

While living in New York Johnson filmed her first national television show Celebrity Close Calls on the Biography Channel, playing the reenactment role of Pam Grier to air
in August of 2011. Additional film credits included an interactive gaming project, an exercise video, and featured actor in Gloria Gaynor’s 30th year anniversary of the I Will Survive video. She is currently in rehearsal for All American Girls: A Negro League of Their Own written and directed by Layon Gray, portraying the role of hard-nosed, no-nonsense, third baseman Jonetta Burns. The production of All American Girls will run Off-Broadway at The Actor’s Temple on 47th Street at the end of July before traveling to the National Black Theatre Festival in Salem, North Carolina to perform the first week of August 2011.
GEM OF THE OCEAN PRODUCTION PHOTOGRAPHS

Compliments of TFGuntrup and the School of Theatre and Dance, University of Florida

BLACK MARY IN THE KITCHEN
BLACK MARY WASHING AUNT ESTER’S FEET
BLACK MARY HOLDING MAP TO THE CITY OF BONES
JOURNEY TO THE CITY OF BONES
1839 WYLIE AVENUE
BLACK MARY SERVING FOOD AND DRINK