



AUGUST WILSON'S

GEM OF THE OCEAN

Directed by TIM BOND

APRIL 6–MAY 1, 2022

THE GUIDE BOOK

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About

TheatreWorks Silicon Valley

Founded in 1970, TheatreWorks has grown from a truly original Silicon Valley start-up to become the peninsula’s leading professional nonprofit theatre company.

Now in our 51st season, TheatreWorks presents a wide variety of contemporary plays and musicals, as well as revitalizing great works of the past. We are champions of new work, offering artists support and a creative home as they develop exciting new stories for the American theatre. Offstage, arts education programs in our schools and arts engagement programs in our neighborhoods uplift our audiences and strengthen community bonds.

Whether onstage or off, in everything that we do, TheatreWorks seeks to celebrate the human spirit and the wonderful diversity of our Silicon Valley community.

For more information, visit theatreworks.org

How to use this guide? It’s easy. It’s link-friendly!

TOC Click on Table of Contents title & you’ll go right to that page!

● BLUE text links are active to external resources.

≡ The arrow (middle bottom of page) will take you to the TOC.

SYNOPSIS

***SPOILER ALERT!** Please only read on if you want to know more about the play before seeing it.*

In 1904 Pittsburgh, 285-year-old **AUNT ESTER** is a spiritual advisor and former slave living with her protégé **BLACK MARY** and gatekeeper **ELI**. Late one night, a man named **CITIZEN BARLOW** arrives seeking guidance from Aunt Ester. Though he is told to come back Tuesday, Citizen remains standing across from Aunt Ester's home through the early morning hours.

RUTHERFORD SELIG, a traveling peddler, arrives and asks Eli why there's a crowd gathering near the church. Eli explains that a funeral is being held for a mill worker named Garret Brown. After being accused of stealing a bucket of nails, Brown jumped into the river and drowned to escape **CAESAR**, the constable and self-proclaimed "boss man" who blamed him for the theft. Caesar also happens to be Black Mary's brother, though the siblings' relationship is strained.

SOLLY TWO KINGS, a former Underground Railroad conductor and suitor of Aunt Ester's, shares a letter from his sister in Alabama. She is increasingly concerned about the racist violence and lynching there. Solly makes plans to travel south and rescue her.

Impatient to be seen by Aunt Ester, Citizen sneaks into the house through the window. He tells Aunt Ester about his troubles. Aunt Ester comforts Citizen and allows him to stay and work at her home.

Meanwhile, the mill employees are rioting and refusing to work, making Caesar furious.

Eventually, Citizen confesses his secret to Aunt Ester. She agrees to help Citizen redeem himself by leading him to "the City of Bones," but first, he needs to go upriver and find two pennies lying side-by-side.

When Citizen returns with the two pennies, Aunt Ester shows him a map of the City of Bones, which she says is the home of millions of enslaved Africans who did not survive the voyage to America. Aunt Ester folds a sheet of paper into the shape of a boat and tells Citizen he will sail on it to the City of Bones, where his soul will be washed. Citizen doesn't understand how he can possibly sail on a small piece of paper, but Aunt Ester insists that if Citizens believes the boat will take him there, it will.

Eli, Black Mary, Aunt Ester, and Citizen all prepare for the journey to the City of Bones. Solly stops in to say goodbye before he leaves for Alabama, but Aunt Ester asks him to stay and help Citizen first. Aunt Ester describes the boat, the Gem of the Ocean, while Black Mary, Eli, and Solly begin singing. Citizen becomes terrified and throws away the paper boat. Suddenly a "storm" comes up and Citizen is symbolically branded, whipped, and left with no water. Alone, Citizen "remembers" and sings an African Lullaby his mother used to sing to comfort him.

Miraculously, Citizen arrives at the City of Bones. He approaches one of the Twelve Gates and realizes that the gatekeeper is Garret Brown, the mill worker who drowned. Citizen finally confronts the truth of his actions, and his soul is washed. When it's over, he finds himself back in Aunt Ester's house.

Just as the group celebrates Citizen's journey, Caesar arrives and blames Solly for a fire at the mill. Soon after, a confession is made, a life is lost, and the lives of everyone at Aunt Ester's house are forever changed...

“Oh what a day...”

— Aunt Ester, on the way to the City of Bones

RECONSTRUCTION IN THE US

Gem of the Ocean takes place in the year 1904. It might seem like this was well past slavery, but history tells a different story. 1904 is only 40 years after the end of the Civil War. **Reconstruction**—the time after the Civil War where the US began the process of reintegrating the Southern States— was a difficult time for Black Americans.

Take a look at what was happening in America in the decades leading up to *Gem of the Ocean*:

1860: Abraham Lincoln is elected president; South Carolina secedes from the Union.

1861: Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, and Louisiana secede.
The Confederate States of America was founded.

1861–1865: The American Civil War

1865: **13th Amendment** to the US Constitution is signed into law, abolishing slavery.

1870: **15th Amendment** to the US Constitution is signed into law,
giving Black Americans the right to vote.

1896: **Plessy v. Ferguson**
is decided by the Supreme
Court, holding that racial segregation is legal,
paving the way for Jim Crow Laws in the South.



Jim Crow Laws made mandating racial segregation easy: bathrooms, restaurants, parks, libraries, and public transportation could all be labeled “Whites only” or “Colored.” Some states even required different textbooks for white students and black students.

Although less formalized in the north, racism was rampant. Black Americans and freed slaves almost always worked for less, gained less, and were treated as though they were less.



What are ways in which we are still feeling the echoes of Reconstruction?



Read this **TIME** article from 2019.

See if you can find 3 examples from today that point to the work we still have to do in making our country equal and united.

“Remember me...”
— Eli and Black Mary



Photo: Jerome Preston Bates, Porscha Shaw by Kevin Berne.



ELDERS IN OUR SOCIETY

Aunt Ester is an elder—a person with tremendous life experience who carries the knowledge, wisdom, and memories of her community. She is a carrier of knowledge and a healer for the community.

Many cultures in the US and beyond have great respect for elders. See if you can match the term with the culture it originates from:

CULTURE	DESCRIPTION
GREEK	Elders are considered “Repositories of cultural and philosophical knowledge and are the transmitters of such information,” including, “basic beliefs and teachings, encouraging...faith in the Great Spirit, the Creator..” ⁽¹⁾
KOREAN	People live in joint family units, with the elders acting as the head of the household. The elders are supported by the younger members of the family and they in turn play a key role in raising their grandchildren.
NATIVE AMERICAN	Geronda, literally translated as “old man,” is a term of reverence. The idea of honoring old age, indeed identifying it with wisdom and closeness to God, is a startling contrast to the way we treat the elderly in America.
INDIAN	Elders who reach the age of 70 are celebrated as kohCui, or “old and rare.” “A superior man is devoted to the fundamental. When the root is firmly established, the moral law will grow. Filial piety and brotherly respect are the root of humanity.” ⁽²⁾

(1) Chief John Snow (1986). Bear Hills Native Voice, p.3. March, 27. Cited in Medicine (2001), p.75.

(2) Confucius, Analects

“Take a deep breath...”

— Black Mary

SOUL FOOD

We all have food traditions that bind us to those that came before.

Soul food is an important Black American food tradition. It originally began with enslaved people using the scraps given to them by their owners to make something communal and delicious using tools, techniques, and ingredients passed on by Native American cultures and those brought over from West Africa.

Over time this food took on a life of its own and is among one of the staple cuisines of American food today. Even if you didn't know it, there's a good chance you've already tried some of the staples of soul food.



Photo: Porscha Shaw by Kevin Berne.



Black-Eyed Peas



Hushpuppies



Sweet Potato Pie



Grits



Fried Chicken



Ham Hocks



Collard Greens



Fried Okra



Cornbread



Fried Catfish



Pickled Pigs Feet



Southern-Style
Potato Salad



Make yourself a plate. A big part of the Black American tradition is communal gathering and family reunions.

- Which of the dishes above would you try?
- What would you bring to the cookout to represent your family and your culture?
- What are dishes that fill you with comfort and remind you of home?
- What is your favorite Black-owned local restaurant?

“Who is the Gatekeeper...”
— Aunt Ester

Photo: Greta Oglesby, Edward Ewell, Porscha Shaw, Jerome Preston Bates by Kevin Berme.



THE NEGRO SPIRITUAL

Negro spirituals form one of the largest and most significant forms of American Folk music. They are a merging of African cultural heritage with the pain and suffering of being in bondage in the American South.

These songs often had stylistic and thematic similarities:

- **Call and Response:** Words and phrases are repeated and passed from one person or group to another while singing. This served a practical purpose as sometimes, when enslaved people were escaping or communicating, the repetition of coded words and encrypted messages helped them communicate and stay safe.
- **Sorrow:** Negro spirituals are often songs of sorrow, expressing the difficulty and challenge of their condition.
- **Use of Hymn and Scripture:** Religion being core to survival for enslaved people, Negro spirituals are often steeped in Christian language.
- **African style and language:** Bringing traditions and language over from West Africa, spirituals often incorporate this tradition of the motherland.



READ some examples of Negro spirituals.



LISTEN to some examples of Negro spirituals.

What are some songs from your culture that represent where you came from?

Try it yourself: Because of circumstance and the oral tradition, Negro spirituals were often very simple in structure. Can you write a song with a simple Call and Response?



*“I got a home in
that graveyard...”*

— Solly Two Kings



Photo: Kim Sullivan by Kevin Berne.



POLICING IN AMERICA

The articles linked below shed light on the history of policing in America. Take a look at the excerpts below and click the links to read the full stories.

From [“The Invention of the Police”](#) by Jill Lepore.

Published in *The New Yorker*, July 20, 2020:

The government of slavery was not a rule of law. It was a rule of police. In 1661, the English colony of Barbados passed its first slave law; revised in 1688, it decreed that “Negroes and other Slaves” were “wholly unqualified to be governed by the Laws . . . of our Nations,” and devised, instead, a special set of rules “for the good Regulating and Ordering of them.”

Modern American policing began in 1909, when August Vollmer became the chief of the police department in Berkeley, California. Vollmer refashioned American police into an American military. He’d served with the Eighth Army Corps in the Philippines in 1898. “For years, ever since Spanish-American War days, I’ve studied military tactics and used them to good effect in rounding up crooks,” he later explained. “After all we’re conducting a war, a war against the enemies of society.” Who were those enemies? Mobsters, bootleggers, socialist agitators, strikers, union organizers, immigrants, and Black people.”

From [“How the US Got Its Police Force”](#) by Olivia B. Waxman.

Published in *Time Magazine*, May 18, 2017:

Policing in Colonial America had been very informal, based on a for-profit, privately funded system that employed people part-time. Towns also commonly relied on a “night watch” in which volunteers signed up for a certain day and time, mostly to look out for fellow colonists engaging in prostitution or gambling...

...The first publicly funded, organized police force with officers on duty full-time was created in Boston in 1838...

...In the South, however... some of the primary policing institutions there were the slave patrols tasked with chasing down runaways and preventing slave revolts. The first formal slave patrol had been created in the Carolina colonies in 1704...

From “How You Start is How You Finish:

The Slave Patrol and Jim Crow Origins of Policing” by Connie Hassett-Walker.

Published by *The American Bar Association*, January 11, 2021:

How did we get here? There are two narratives of how U.S. policing developed. Both are true.

The more commonly known history—the one most college students will hear about in an Introduction to Criminal Justice course—is that American policing can trace its roots back to English policing. It’s true that centralized municipal police departments in America began to form in the early nineteenth century (Potter, 2013), beginning in Boston and subsequently established in New York City; Albany, New York; Chicago; Philadelphia; Newark, New Jersey; and Baltimore. As written by Professor Gary Potter (2013) of Eastern Kentucky University, by the late nineteenth century, all major American cities had a police force. This is the history that doesn’t make us feel bad.

While this narrative is correct, it only tells part of the story (Turner et al., 2006). Policing in southern slave-holding states followed a different trajectory—one that has roots in slave patrols of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and police enforcement of Jim Crow laws in the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries. As per Professor Michael Robinson (2017) of the University of Georgia, the first deaths in America of Black men at the hands of law enforcement “can be traced back as early as 1619 when the first slave ship, a Dutch Man-of-War vessel landed in Point Comfort, Virginia.”

When a relationship begins like this, can citizen mistrust of police ever fully be overcome? Has policing as an institution evolved far enough away from its origins to warrant Black communities’ trust?”

There are many groups currently working on reforming policing in America and bringing these topics to light since the 2020 shooting of George Floyd. These groups include:

- THE BLACK LIVES MATTER MOVEMENT
- 1619 PROJECT
- VARIOUS STATE LEGISLATION



Do you think the policing system in America needs reform? If so, how would you change it and why?

Consider the character of Caesar, the constable in *Gem of the Ocean*. What struggles did being a police officer cause for him internally and externally?



“You made it back...”

— Aunt Ester, returning from the City of Bones



Photo: Porscha Shaw, Greta Oglesby by Kevin Berne.



RITUAL AS HEALING

A ritual forms the foundation of *Gem of the Ocean*. Rituals are a core part of many of our lives. There are formal rituals like we see in the play—ceremonies consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order, including things like prayer, chants, drumming, songs, stories, and the use of a variety of sacred objects.

But there are also more common types of rituals we use in our everyday lives: repeated activities that help ground us and connect us to the world, to each other, and to ourselves. Things like yoga and exercise or weddings and funerals. Ritual forms the foundation of many of our lives.

According to *Scientific American*, “Rituals performed after experiencing losses— from loved ones to lotteries— do alleviate grief, and rituals performed before high-pressure tasks— like singing in public— do in fact reduce anxiety and increase people’s confidence.”



Below are some examples of highly effective daily rituals. Circle the rituals you utilize. Remember, it’s only a ritual if you do it mindfully and on purpose.

Waking up early to ground yourself	Practicing meditation	Having a healthy breakfast	Using a calendar to schedule your day
Making time for things you love to do	Unplugging from technology	Exercise	Keeping a journal
Taking a walk	Going to bed at a predictable time		

In the two empty spaces, write your own rituals.

- What do you do to ground yourself?
- What are the bigger rituals your family does as tradition?



ELI: *“Freedom is what you make it.”*

SOLLY: *“That’s what I’m saying.
You gotta fight to make it mean something.”*





Photo: Kim Sullivan, Jerome Preston Bates, Edward Ewell by Kevin Berne.

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