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A Stalwart in the Club of 'Essential Wise Men'

By [PATRICK HEALY](#)

He didn't realize it at the time, but the actor Stephen McKinley Henderson first auditioned for [August Wilson](#) on a street corner in Pittsburgh in 1990, seven years before they first worked together on the Wilson play "Jitney." Mr. Henderson was researching the city's Hill District for a role in Wilson's "Joe Turner's Come and Gone," and a chance encounter with one of the playwright's sisters led to an introduction.

"Before August would talk, though, he wanted to know if I was for real," Mr. Henderson recalled in an interview last month. Wilson then asked if he knew the firebrand poet [Amiri Baraka](#). "I said I knew Amiri. He said, 'Do you know some of the poems?' So I started reciting a poem by Amiri called 'Black Art,' and August started nodding, smiling, saying, 'Oh yeah, man, that's a good one, that's a good one.'"

"And then we talked about the blues, our lives, his plays, and three cigarettes later, I think a pretty firm connection was made."

Wilson, who died in 2005, eventually brought Mr. Henderson into a small fellowship of actors who have earned accolades for mastering a particular Wilson archetype: supporting male characters who act as conscience, confidants or clairvoyants in his 10-play cycle about the black experience in 20th-century America — plays that include "Fences," in which Mr. Henderson is portraying one of those men, Jim Bono, in the current Broadway revival at the Cort Theater.

Mr. Henderson has been nominated for a [Tony Award](#) for best featured actor in a play for the performance. It is his first Tony nomination, but the 15th in that category from the 12 original productions and revivals of Wilson plays on Broadway, starting with "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" in 1984. Just last year Roger Robinson won the Tony for featured actor as Bynum in "Joe Turner."

Alongside the main characters of his 10 plays, who tend to be black men in search of justice in the world, Wilson created a lineage of male friends and relatives who provide a century's

worth of commentary about black life since slavery. From Bynum in “Joe Turner” and Jim Bono to Lymon in the [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning “Piano Lesson” and Sterling in Wilson’s last original Broadway play, “Radio Golf,” the characters offer pungent reflections on free black men searching for work, love and hope in America.

Many of these characters are hardened from time in prison or on chain gangs, some on trumped-up charges. Many quote blues songs or the Bible. Some speak mystically, as if they were oracles, like the mentally troubled Gabriel in “Fences” and Hambone in “Two Trains Running.” Hambone’s oft-repeated refrain in that play — “He gonna give me my ham” — refers to the broken word of a white man who promised a ham as payment for an odd job but gave Hambone a chicken instead.

John Earl Jelks, who earned a Tony nomination in 2007 as Sterling in “Radio Golf,” said in an interview that he believed these “essential wise men” were grist for Tony-nominated performances because “they are seemingly ordinary men who say and do extraordinary things, men who don’t enjoy the spotlight but still provide so much insight and poetry in the plays.”

“Fences,” a Pulitzer winner in 1987 and one of Wilson’s most plot-driven dramas, is relatively lacking in his trademark poetry, yet a couple of high points belong to Mr. Henderson’s Jim Bono, the fellow garbage man and devoted friend of the main character, Troy Maxson ([Denzel Washington](#)), since their years in prison together. In one scene Jim describes “the walking blues,” a condition of men like Jim’s father, who abandoned wives and children to seek an idealized life that freedom was supposed to promise — a theme repeated throughout Wilson’s work.

“Searching out the New Land, that’s what the old folks used to call it,” Jim says in the “Fences” script. “See a fellow moving around from place to place, woman to woman — called it searching out the New Land.” Referring to his absent father, Jim added, “I can’t say if he ever found it.”

Mr. Henderson, 60, delivers those lines without any affect, a choice that he described “as important to doing August right.” Over lunch at the Cafe Edison in Midtown, Mr. Henderson, a professor of theater at the [University at Buffalo](#), said that the essence of performing Wilson was “not simply bringing life to the stage, but rather bringing the truth of life to the stage, as one of my teachers used to say.”

“A major part of that is avoiding actorly utterances, and just saying the words, letting the music of his words flow naturally,” added Mr. Henderson, whose other Broadway roles in

Wilson plays were Stool Pigeon in “King Hedley II” (2001) and Slow Drag in the 2003 revival of “Ma Rainey.” In all, he has appeared in 16 productions of Wilson plays.

The notion of the walking blues has struck a deep chord in the actor, as has being a part of the extended Wilson family of supporting men. When Mr. Henderson was a young child in Kansas City, Mo., his mother gave him to another family to raise. She was only in her 20s, and coping with an older son who had become deaf; his father was largely absent because of hospitalizations for injuries suffered during the Korean War.

“After a time my mother came to get me, but these people said, no, no, no, no, because they were childless and they had spent time raising me,” Mr. Henderson recalled. “I always wanted to be with my mother, but it wasn’t to be, it wasn’t to be, because it would have torn this other family apart.

“But man, there was always that pull inside me — I felt in a permanent unsettled state. And so when Jim talks about the walking blues, that feeling of being disconnected, it reminds me of feeling like you weren’t enough for someone you really wanted to be enough for. You feel so alone.

“But that’s why the community of these men in August’s plays is such a joy to be a part of. To be a member of something. To be a member of something helps get rid of that lonely feeling.”

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