



For more information call:  
Julie McGarvie 651.288.6784  
[julie.mcgarvie@penumbratheatre.org](mailto:julie.mcgarvie@penumbratheatre.org)

Melodie Bahan 612.225.6140  
[melodieb@guthrietheater.org](mailto:melodieb@guthrietheater.org)

**Cast and creative team announced for Penumbra Theatre's production of  
August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean*  
An upper Midwest premiere**

March 20, 2008: (*Minneapolis/St. Paul*) Penumbra Theatre has announced the cast and creative team for August Wilson's *Gem of the Ocean* directed by **Lou Bellamy**. The Guthrie is proud to present the production, which begins previews April 22 and plays through May 18, 2008 on the McGuire Proscenium Stage. Tickets are priced from \$24 to \$69 and are on sale through the Guthrie Box Office at 612.377.2224, toll-free 877.44.STAGE and online at <http://www.guthrietheater.org/>.

With *Gem of the Ocean*, two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright **August Wilson** begins his *Twentieth Century Cycle* chronicling black American life in the Hill District of Pittsburgh in 1904. Aunt Ester (**Marvette Knight**), the drama's 287-year-old fiery matriarch, welcomes into her Hill District home Solly Two Kings (**James Craven**), who was born into slavery and scouted for the Union Army, and Citizen Barlow (**Cedric Mays**), a young man from Alabama searching for a new life. Bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, the first generation of black Americans recently freed from slavery are unprepared for the backlash against their newly acquired freedom by whites. Many venture north and find themselves at Aunt Ester's door, seeking solace, advice, or a place to heal.

"A founding company member of Penumbra, Wilson sat in countless rehearsals watching his friends and fellow artists stage plays that explored the depth and breadth of the African American experience. He was inspired to write for the actors whom he called his friends. The characters he created are mighty, the stories epic in scope. Through his plays we can experience, ponder and reckon with our unique American history." Penumbra Artistic Director Lou Bellamy said. "The partnering of the Guthrie and Penumbra allows our particular experiences and areas of expertise to join forces, offering the community a unique opportunity to experience Wilson's work at its best."

"When we first partnered with Lou and Penumbra on *Fences* in 1997, we learned that such collaboration could be a successful one," Guthrie Artistic Director Joe Dowling said. "We're

thrilled that the Guthrie can serve as a community resource for other arts organizations, and this type of partnership will serve to strengthen both the Guthrie and Penumbra.”

The stellar ensemble features James Craven (Solly Two Kings), Abdul Salaam El Razzac (Eli), Terry Hempleman (Rutherford Selig), Marvette Knight (Aunt Ester), Cedric Mays (Citizen Barlow), T. Mychael Rambo (Caesar), and Austene Van (Black Mary).

Bellamy is joined by an artistic team that includes Mathew J. LeFebvre (Set Designer and Costume Designer), Michelle Habeck (Lighting Designer), Malo Adams (Sound Designer), Stephanie Lein Walseth (Dramaturg), Mary K. Winchell (Stage Manager), Elizabeth MacNally (Assistant Stage Manager).

### **Penumbra and August Wilson**

Anointed as a definitive interpreter of August Wilson, Lou Bellamy has been rigorously recruited to direct at theatres around the country. His New York City debut of August Wilson’s *Two Trains Running* at the Signature Theatre in 2006 sold-out two extensions and New York critics picked it as one of the top 10 productions of the year. The production also received the 2007 Lucille Lortel Award for Outstanding Revival, and Bellamy received an Obie for Best Direction. In the same year, Bellamy also directed a sold out run of *Jitney* at the Kansas City Repertory Theatre, a production that went to the Arizona Theatre Company in Phoenix and Tucson. Most recently, he was invited to direct the staged reading of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* at the Kennedy Center in Washington D.C. in their 2008 staged reading of Wilson’s entire *Twentieth Century Cycle*.

Penumbra Theatre produced August Wilson’s first professional production, and has since produced more of his plays than any other theatre in the world. In a speech given at Penumbra Theatre in 1996, August Wilson stated, “I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theater in the country and that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work.”

Over the next five seasons, Penumbra will produce the entire August Wilson 10-play cycle, presenting two plays each season. Penumbra’s 2007-2008 Season launched this commitment with the production of *The Piano Lesson* at Penumbra’s home theatre in St. Paul and the production of *Gem of the Ocean* at the Guthrie.

“We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of Penumbra Theatre enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans. It was one of, if not the only field endeavor, I saw being sanctioned by blacks. It was a platform from which we might investigate ourselves, our manners and way of life, our history, our failures and our triumphs. Penumbra is fortunate to have Lou Bellamy to guide and encourage that investigation, and to open avenues

for its growth and expansion. To provide that platform is no small accomplishment.” August Wilson, 1996

## **About the Guthrie**

The Guthrie Theater, founded in 1963, is an American center for theater performance, production, education and professional training. The Guthrie is dedicated to producing the great works of dramatic literature, developing the work of contemporary playwrights and cultivating the next generation of theater artists.

The idea of the theater began in 1959 during a series of conversations among Sir Tyrone Guthrie and two colleagues—Oliver Rea and Peter Zeisler—who were disenchanted with Broadway. They wanted to create a theater with a resident acting company that would perform the classics in rotating repertory with the highest professional standards. The Guthrie became a prototype for an important new kind of theater in contrast to the commercial environment of Broadway. There, the high costs associated with mounting a production increasingly mandated that shows must be immediately successful at high ticket prices. The Broadway atmosphere was conducive neither to producing the great works of literature, nor to cultivating the artists' talents, nor to nourishing the audience.

Led by Director Joe Dowling since 1995, the Guthrie recently moved to their new three-theater home on the banks of the Mississippi River in Minneapolis.

The Guthrie is located at 818 South 2nd Street (at Chicago Avenue), in downtown Minneapolis. To purchase tickets or season subscriptions call the Guthrie Theater Box Office between 10 a.m. and 8 p.m. daily at 612.377.2224 or toll-free 877.44.STAGE. For more information, or to purchase tickets online, visit [www.guthrietheater.org](http://www.guthrietheater.org).

## **About Penumbra Theatre Company**

For 31 years, Penumbra has been a vibrant voice in American theatre - especially here in Minnesota as the state's only professional African American theatre company. Founded in 1976, Bellamy rooted the theatre in the tenets of the Black Arts Movement – art of, by and for the black community – created by artists whose ethics and aesthetics were one. Out of this came mission driven art, art for social change, art that was critical, forceful and demanded response, art that created and sustained a community. The times were controversial in 1976 but the time is no less controversial today. Of the 200 black theatres borne of the movement, less than a dozen remain active; and of those survivors, only Penumbra is dedicated to cultural authenticity of those that are largely undocumented and invisible. On stage, Penumbra illuminates the universality of the human condition through the prism of the African American experience. This unique signature style resonates with audiences, critics, and artists across the nation. It is what distinguishes Penumbra from other black theatres and other theatres that present works by and with black artists. It is a forum that continues to flourish - where powerful and provocative art stimulates open and honest dialogue around issues of race.

Recognized nationally as the preeminent African American theatre, Penumbra is acclaimed for its high quality mission driven art that exists to benefit the communities it serves. Productions make the top ten lists annually and generate dialogue on issues of racism through its education and outreach programs as well as through public radio discussions and news articles generated by the issues presented in the plays.

## QUICK REFERENCE

- Production:** Penumbra's production of *Gem of the Ocean* by August Wilson  
Presented at the Guthrie Theater on the McGuire Proscenium Stage
- Director:** Lou Bellamy
- Ensemble:** James Craven (Solly Two Kings)  
Abdul Salaam El Razzac (Eli)  
Terry Hempleman (Rutherford Selig)  
Marvette Knight (Aunt Ester)  
Cedric Mays (Citizen Barlow)  
T. Mychael Rambo (Caesar)  
Austene Van (Black Mary)
- Design Team:** Mathew J. LeFebvre (Set Designer and Costume Designer)  
Michelle Habeck (Lighting Designer)  
Malo Adams (Sound Designer)
- Dates:** April 25 through May 18, 2008  
Previews April 22, 23 & 24  
Opening Friday, April 25, 2008
- Performances:** Tuesdays 7:30pm  
Wednesdays 7:30pm  
Thursdays 7:30pm  
Fridays 7:30pm  
Saturdays 1:00pm and 7:30pm  
Sundays 1:00pm and 7:30pm
- Tickets:** Are on sale through the Guthrie Box Office: 612.377.2224  
toll-free 877.44.STAGE or online at <http://www.guthrietheater.org/>.
- Price:** \$24 to \$69
- Theatre Location:** The Guthrie is located at 818 South 2nd Street, downtown Minneapolis.
- Media Contacts:** Julie McGarvie, 651-288-6784  
[julie.mcgarvie@penumbratheatre.org](mailto:julie.mcgarvie@penumbratheatre.org)  
  
Melodie Bahan, 612-225-6140  
[melodieb@guthrietheater.org](mailto:melodieb@guthrietheater.org)

*The Twentieth Century Cycle is presented by Cargill  
Penumbra Theatre's 2007-2008 Season is presented by Star Tribune and Minnesota Monthly*