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RADIO GOLF

By August Wilson

Directed by Lou Bellamy
Presented by Cargill

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Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide
Spotlight Interview: The Director

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: THE DIRECTOR

by Stephanie Lein Walseth, August Wilson Fellow

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LEIN WALSETH: *Radio Golf*, the last play of Wilson's 20th Century Cycle, is the only play that Penumbra hasn't already produced. When was the last time you approached one of Wilson's works for the first time, and what specifically, is exciting about coming to this piece for the first time?

BELLAMY: The last time I worked with one of Wilson's shows for the first time was *Gem of the Ocean*, and that happened because *Gem of the Ocean* (chronologically the first play of the cycle) and *Radio Golf* (the last play of the cycle) were the last two plays Wilson wrote before he died in 2005. In fact, he was finishing up *Radio Golf* literally on his death bed.

Radio Golf is a challenge for me because Wilson's voice is older than the 1990s. He has an understanding of black culture that is more from the 40s, 30s, not even the 50s. You start getting to the 50s and you can feel that his language sounds best in the mouths of the older people. And so, with this play people are cursing and speaking in a more up-to-date fashion and it was difficult for me to address the demands of the time the play is set in and still bring out those recurring themes that Wilson deals with. So, it's been a challenge in that regard. There is still much about the play that one would recognize as Wilsonian, but I think that the time in which the play is set is a challenge for both August Wilson and for me.

LEIN WALSETH: One of the things we've discussed frequently in these spotlight interviews is how each production will be produced with a specific aesthetic that is unique to Penumbra. I'm curious how you're seeing this specificity here, especially because, as you say, this play is different in many ways from other plays in the cycle. So, how do you envision this production of *Radio Golf* being particularly Penumbran?

BELLAMY: So much of it has to do with our ensemble approach to acting, which happens long before one gets to the stage. You don't get onstage and say, "Alright, now we're going to do this ensemble work." It begins, in the case of this particular show, with four of the five actors who have been together, with the company and each other, for 20 years, 25, 30 years even. So, that idea of ensemble is steeped in the relationships that we already have, things we've already worked out, and problems and so forth that we haven't. All of that comes into the mix to make for a particular style. These artists are chosen because they respect that style, understand it, and know how to interact inside of it. So, that has very much to do with creating this ensemble. It happens, for instance, when I talk with the cast and say, "We will be doing company bows rather than individual bows." That's a real signal to everyone that this is a group effort and everyone is in on the group and participating at equal levels. So, that's certainly a part of it.

The other part of it is recognizing the innate rhythms of the culture and allowing those to influence meaning and looking for what we call "the jazz," the "stuff" of the play. And that changes in very subtle ways. Someone says a line differently, they go up at the end of a line rather than going down, or they hold a gaze a little too long. All of that becomes part of the mix when the company knows each other as well as we do, and it begins to live on its own almost. You know, there are jazz musicians who will work out all kinds of changes beforehand, but they won't give them to the other players until they walk into the studio, because they want that freshness. I deal very much in that sort of way. Does that answer your question? Is that what you're getting at?

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LEIN WALSETH: Yes, I think so. It also has to do with making specific choices that are different from other productions of the same play. When we talked about *Gem of the Ocean*, for example, you had seen certain productions and you had clear ideas and intentions for choices that you specifically *didn't* want to recreate.

BELLAMY: Certainly, certainly that's here in this piece as well. I think that the protagonist in many Wilson plays is offstage, and it is the forces that create the crucible in which these people interact. It isn't as clear in this play as it is in some of the others, and I've sought to find ways to bring that community into the room where the drama is taking place.

LEIN WALSETH: Speaking of bringing things into the room, I don't think we can address *Radio Golf*, a play about one black man's rise to potential political acclaim, without discussing the campaign, victory, and early presidency of Barack Obama. Could you talk a bit about whether and how you see parallels between Harmond Wilks and Obama, especially in terms of the way that issues of class complicate issues of race in America today? Or in terms of the struggle between individual advancement and a sense of concern and care for the larger community?

BELLAMY: Well, this play was written even before Obama was going to run for president, so Wilson had no clue that that was going to happen. None of us did. But some of the words that he has written here could have been ripped from the morning's newspaper; when Harmond Wilks says for instance, "I'm going to be mayor of all the people, not just the black people." How many times have you heard Barack Obama say something like that?

There's a particular challenge for an individual whose experience, growth, and morays come out of a certain culture that is perceived to be a subculture of the larger society. They maintain all those nuances, all that meaning and so forth, but they have to interact in the larger culture. So, it's sort of a spice that informs them as they move through the world. You watch Barack Obama walk into a joint session of Congress, and you see him walking with a kind of a step that has a little jazz in it that black people recognize immediately, and a way of greeting people, pointing in a kind of a way, and a certain kind of "Hey!" He is *performing* blackness but not *talking* blackness. It makes for a particularly nuanced kind of communication because different people are seeing different things at the exact same time. So, that ability to switch codes and to maintain codes is the stock and trade of any individual who makes it in the general society but whose bones, whose upbringing came out of a subset of that society. It makes for an interesting interaction, one that August really tapped into in this play, and one that you hear Harmond talking about again and again. When the community makes themselves present, they test him. They say, "Are you going to be the mayor of the black folks or the white folks?" And he says, "I'm going to be the mayor of all the people." You know, it's questionable for them whether or not he's going to be able to maintain that precarious equilibrium.

LEIN WALSETH: Yes, that doubt is clear, especially in Sterling's case. Will we see any of what you've observed about Obama, that enacting of multiple codes at the same time, manifesting in the production?

BELLAMY: Oh sure. The play, as I've come to understand it, is rather like the radicalization of Harmond Wilks. That could have been another name for the title. Harmond has left the Hill. He's grown up there, he's been imprinted by those values and so forth, but he has gone on to Cornell. He's been in these Ivy League kind of finishing institutions and is a little out of step with the community. He values the community and he wants to do well by them, even setting up his office in the Hill District. But what Wilson does is set up hurdles for Harmond, and I try to help that along in production. Even in the prologue when Harmond's moving into the new

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office, he leaves the door open and goes outside with community people sort of standing around and it's obvious that he isn't aware of the kind of vigilance that one has to take when people are pushed by poverty to be "enterprising." [laughter] So, in fact, he ends up getting his golf clubs stolen while he's in the neighborhood. So, right away we see there's a little bit of a disconnect in the way he deals with people. He also wants to come back to the community fresh, but he brings his name back to the community, and that Wilks name means something inside of the community. His father was a real estate developer and had rather a name for making deals where he came out on top, so Harmond's got to reconcile that.

I think it was Sarah, or it might have been you, but someone dealing with the dramaturgy of the production came up with the observation that Wilson's black community loses its moral compass when there isn't an Aunt Ester present.

LEIN WALSETH: Yes, that's Sarah, in her contextual essay in the study guide.

BELLAMY: And man, oh man, oh man, it is just so true, because that is *exactly* what is going on here. The community is seeking to put itself back on track. It's been adrift, and the reason it's been adrift is that they've lost their connection with Aunt Ester and the ancestors. Wilson realizes that it is necessary for this generation that went away to be educated in other places to return to the community, and to bring all of their skills and all of their knowledge with them, in order for the entire community to move forward. Oh, I just love it! It's really cool, you know? I hope we've given voice to that realization, and brought nuance to it with the direction and acting.

LEIN WALSETH: What you've just illuminated returns us to the question, "Are you going to be the mayor of the black folks or the white folks?" and Harmond's response that he's going to be the mayor of all the people. I wonder if this is possible and who his work will benefit? In the same vein, what might be some parallels or disjunctions between what's happening in *Radio Golf* and how Penumbra has been situated within its community?

BELLAMY: It's tricky, and I think that while actions themselves are pure, it is the contextualization of the actions that need special care. For instance, I heard Barack Obama the other day say that someone accused people of voting for him because of his race. And he said, "Well, I'm sure that's true for a portion of the population, but there's also a portion of the population that voted *against* me because of my race." So, it's again the contextualization of that pure act and the understanding of it that gives us its true meaning.

Penumbra has always existed inside of the black community. This is necessary because we grew out of the Black Arts Movement, and the Black Arts Movement eschews any effort to separate the artist from their community. That's what makes for black theater: when the community is present. When we see a *Caroline, or Change* or a *Six Degrees of Separation* or those plays where there is a black person even at the center of the text, so often they are there as though they fell out of the sky. There's no community with them and so all of their actions are in reaction to an entire genre or creation that is built up of morays and understandings that are European. Without that community they look out of place, and it's easy to brush them aside or set them on odd courses because they don't have to answer to the group.

What the artist should be doing, and what Harmond Wilks in this play is doing, is bringing to bear their special kind of experience and knowledge, bringing that into the community and allowing the community to share in that knowledge and expand their decision-making skills, their perception of themselves, all that sort of thing. That link between the artist and community, the politician and the community, is necessary for a kind of accountability and it's

one that black scholars and artists have understood for a very long time. W.E.B. DuBois talked about *of, by, and for*, which was straight out of the constitution, but he also added a fourth caveat or prescription: *near*. You gotta be *in* and *of* the people. You just need them. That relationship between the individual and the group is what distinguishes, I think, African American culture and makes it distinct from a larger American culture.

LEIN WALSETH: One of the things that I was struck by in this piece is the variety of different strategies that are modeled for dealing with racism, oppression, and inequality. On the one hand we have this poster of Martin Luther King: an icon, a Civil Rights leader who professed an equal rights or integration stance. And then we have Sterling who echoes Solly and Eli from *Gem of the Ocean* when he talks about being "on the battlefield." This speaks to me of a more revolutionary stance.

BELLAMY: And on the other wall you've got Tiger Woods who represents an elitist pastime that can only be taken up by the very, very rich in our society. I think these are all strategies that can move one toward a full participation in the society, but some of them are rendered mute or sterile by the society. For instance, Old Joe talks about carrying a flag through the war and then when he comes back home a white fellow rips the flag off of his uniform and says, "You have no right to wear the American flag." I think that's very true historically, whenever blacks have fought, from the American Revolution on, they still have not found the kind of full participation that a veteran laying down their life for the country would expect.

I know that Wilson perceived himself to be a warrior. He did. You will find these warrior images, warrior motifs in all of his plays. It tends to be a kind of leavening that the society needs. You and I have talked so much about Native [American] culture, and that's one of the things that's so lovely about it. There's that warrior side of the society, but they recognize that that is only to be used at certain times, and they have rituals for when people come back from war. They say, "Now look, we appreciate you going and letting yourself go crazy for us, but you can cut that crap out now." You know? [laughter] There's a place for it in the society because they understand what it takes. But for the warriors in the larger society, a Sterling or an Old Joe, we haven't quite figured out a way to heal them after that experience.

So you've got that sort of "warrior" view, and then you've got a completely materialistic view represented by Roosevelt. It's interesting, I just thought of his name and these presidents and so forth…I've got to do some more thinking about that. But he is totally materialistic and sees his success in the society by how much he can make in terms of money and material wealth. Harmond is somewhere in between: he wants to make money but he wants to do good for the society as well. Together, all of these views and these characters make up what we could call a normal curve. One might even say these are all reactions to capitalism. I mean it's completely within the bounds of the dictates of capitalism.

LEIN WALSETH: This goes to another one of my questions about Roosevelt and his specific tactics. I'm very intrigued by Wilson's choice of the words "black face" in talking about Roosevelt. I think Roosevelt interprets his actions as tactical maneuvers that will change his circumstances - from having to go in the back door, to being in the room, to being at the table making the decisions. But Wilson's choice of the specific words "black face" draws our attention inevitably to the practice of blackface minstrelsy…

BELLAMY: Yes.

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LEIN WALSETH: …in which whites first performed their stereotyped imaginings of African Americans, and later in which blacks were also forced to perform these same stereotypes if they wanted a job on the stage. I'm curious to know what you think Wilson is saying here, and also how you might try to embody that in this production?

BELLAMY: I think you've touched on something that's really interesting. You see a similar treatment in the way August uses "Negro" and "nigger" in the play. When I went to see this play at Yale, and the conversation about "Negro" and "nigger" came up in the dialogue, I almost fell out of my chair. That conversation is the same conversation that August Wilson and I had in Kansas City when I was there to direct a production of his play *Two Trains Running*. We were at this party with very rich people, art all over the walls and all that kind of stuff, and there was this black guy there who came to me and said, "I don't like all that "nigger" in that play, it embarrasses me" and so on. And I told him, I said, "Well, August mentions Negro once in *Two Trains Running*, and you don't want to be *that guy*. [laughter] That's the guy, that's the grandfather that the old guy wanted to *kill*. So, I spoke with August about it. I said, "Now August, see that dude over there? The one munching on whatever he was eating? He's going to be here talking to you in just a minute and here's what it is, he's upset…" Well, then we got into this whole debate about the difference between "Negro" and "nigger" and which is revolutionary and which isn't and so forth, and that is exactly the conversation that is up on stage in this play. It was about six months before he had written this play, so it really surprised me. Playwrights - you gotta be careful talking to them!

Because of this conversation, there is one change I made in the script, and I know if August were alive he'd go along with it. When Harmond walks over and says that thing about black face to Roosevelt towards the end of the play where the breakup is about the happen, and he calls him the "shuffling, grinning nigger," I changed it to "Negro" because that is exactly the distinction that Sterling makes between a "nigger" who is *of* the culture, understands all of the good and the bad of it; and a "Negro." Sterling says, "White people get you confused. They think you're a nigger but you're not a nigger. I'm a nigger. You're a Negro." He goes on to say, "A dog knows it's a dog. A cat knows it's a cat. But a Negro don't know he's a Negro. He thinks he's a white man." So, you've got similar things going on between the idea of black face and these two different terms, and both issues speak to people's attempts to make it, if you will, to attain the American Dream inside of a set of societal rules that are sometimes unfair.

Now, because some people, mostly Democrats, realized that there was a certain amount of inequity in these rules, they came up with the idea of affirmative action to sort of level the field. The intent was to put blacks in business, and people got tax credits for minority businesses, and women in business, you name it, as the country tried to adjust capitalist systems to let everybody share in them. Well, what happened, inevitably, was that those wolves, those raging capitalists saw this as a new opportunity and began strategically putting up a "black face" or a female body in order to maintain their position of power, while simultaneously reaping all of the benefits that the government was willing to deliver in their attempts at redress. You saw it in housing, you saw it in almost every part of our economy. And if one is unscrupulous enough, he can stand there and be the face, the black face, the front of the mask for someone else who is going to take advantage of the system. Certainly that's what's going on with Roosevelt. Now, there's a kind of performance that is expected in those kinds of positions as well which has been written about and handled in movies and so forth - what these window dressings in many companies are supposed to do. Roosevelt is willing to play that role for a certain amount of money, but I'm sure there's a cost for it. There's just got to be.

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LEIN WALSETH: And I think Roosevelt comes from a specific line of characters in Wilson's cycle. We have Caesar in *Gem of the Ocean*, we have Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson*, all of these men who voice the importance and the attainability of the American Dream. With these particular characters there seems to be a measure of self worth and masculine identity that's tied to ideas of individualism and capitalism - getting a piece of the pie, getting in the game, getting into the system. In this play, Roosevelt finds the embodiment of all of these ideals in golf. What do you think Wilson is saying or critiquing with the repetition of these tropes as articulated by these men?

BELLAMY: I think that the actualization of self is frustrated for blacks because the broader American society places limits upon their mobility. You take *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* where we've got Seth who knows how to make pots and pans. In a fair America, he would have opened Westinghouse or something because he had this skill and he could then move that skill forward and so forth. Because blacks don't have that kind of mobility, they're held in certain kinds of positions. Roosevelt sees golf, in fact both he and Harmond see golf in that way: they take the *symbol* of that freedom *as* freedom, so much so that Roosevelt says, "I've never felt freer in my life than when I hit a golf ball." Now that's a bankrupt brother! [laughter] He's in some tough shape if that's his idea of freedom! He might as well be talking about butterflies or something. You know what I'm saying? So, there's a disconnect when the trappings of success are considered success. And I think that's the trap of capitalism for everybody. It is interesting though, that all of these people are simply doing things that for white people work and make them rich and make them influential and all that sort of thing, but the same sort of behavior by blacks doesn't result in the same kinds of benefits.

LEIN WALSETH: We've spoken a bit about these men and how masculinity is dealt with, and I'm also interested in Mame, the only female character in the play. The danger, when there is only one of any kind of character in a play, is of course to assume that he or she speaks for an entire group, in this case women. So, how might you compare or contrast her with Aunt Ester, who has since died when *Radio Golf* takes place? How do both of these women fit into the larger African American community, and how might their gendered positions influence the decisions they make and actions they take?

BELLAMY: You know, it's interesting that you give them a similar kind of effect upon the society and upon the males around them. I view Mame as the supreme capitalist. I really do. She's impelling Harmond to political office, and yet she is, I think, more qualified than Harmond to be mayor, to make it in the business world. She keeps his calendar, she writes his commercials, she plans out his agenda, she writes his speeches. *She* should be mayor! And the only thing that's stopping that, I think, is that she's a female. She's willing to meet him sort of halfway, and I think Wilson gets at that with the story about how they met and how they were changing the tire and how she was outside standing in the rain with him rather than sitting inside like a doll.

Wilson understands that without women there's nothing, whether or not he always gives them the words to explain that. People will argue about that. I think that Mame, the female in this particular piece, is underwritten. I do. I remember once in an undergraduate directing class that I was teaching, August came to the class after they had just read *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and this little girl in class told him, she said "I think that…" (and I forgot the name of the girl who was Ma's sort of concubine in the play), she said, "I think she's underwritten." And I almost died! I went, "Oh my God." And do you know what he said? He said "You know, I think you're right. I really forgot about her."

I think in this case we get glimpses of Mame's aptitude and so forth but it's not realized. And so, in my blocking I have done something that I think will help realize it to some extent. (I don't know what August would have felt about it but I know what I'm trying to do with it.) When she and Harmond have their last scene together, I've blocked it so that he has an opportunity to answer a phone call that's from a reporter or something, or to continue speaking with her. The phone's ringing, and she says, "I'm going to see you for dinner tonight?" and he reaches for his phone and she says, "Harmond" and he looks at her for a minute, and then he answers the phone and goes off into that next moment and she just backs away and walks out. She doesn't walk away all dejected like, "I'm hurt, this man threw me in the gutter" and all that sort of thing. She walks out there thinking, "I'm going on, and I'm going to be something, I'm sorry if I can't take you with me." It's my way of trying to empower her, because I don't think it's in the script. But, it will be interesting to see what you think about it when you see it.

LEIN WALSETH: I'll look for it! One final question before you have to go back to rehearsal. What do you think happens after the close of the curtain – to Mame as she walks out the door, to Harmond, to the rest of the characters, to Aunt Ester's house, to the redevelopment project, to the Hill District? Wilson points us in the directions that he thinks things are going to happen, but he still leaves a lot of questions and loose ends at the end of his 20th century chronicles.

BELLAMY: Well, I think it was up for grabs, and it's still up for grabs. We've got a black president and what does that mean? You know? I don't know what that means. But one thing is clear at the end of *Radio Golf* – that the resource of a Cornell education and all of that cultural capital has now been turned to use for the community. I've got to think that bodes well. Again, let's take a note from Native Americans. What happened when they started getting casino money and making money? Oh, my God, they could hire the same kind of lawyers. And what happened? They started buying back land, they started getting power, they started taking care of themselves in a whole different way because they made that link. I think that's what's coming here, is that all of that knowledge that would have been going to some private law firm or something like that is now back in the community. You've got this brilliant charismatic guy who could have been mayor of all the people who's now up there painting Aunt Ester's house and is going to be working for the community. I've got to think that bodes well.

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