



Gem of the Ocean

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This ninth play in August Wilson's ten-play cycle examining African American life in the United States during the twentieth century had one of the shortest runs of any Wilson play. The play, which originally ran for over three hours, was reduced to a two-and-a-half hour production when it was brought to Broadway after its Los Angeles premiere.

Audiences are immediately forced to suspend their disbelief when they learn that the play's protagonist, Aunt Ester Tyler, is 287 years old. She was born when the first slave ships left Africa for the New World, has survived more than two centuries of slavery, and now experiences a freedom legally granted by the Emancipation Proclamation but withheld by most of the dominant, white society.

The characters that Wilson creates in this play are arresting. Besides Aunt Ester, in whose house in Pittsburgh's Hill District much of the play takes place, there is Solly, a slave who escaped to Canada but returned at his own peril to help slaves escape via the Underground Railroad. He points to sixty-two slaves whom he has helped to free in this way. Citizen Barlow is a troubled character who has committed a murder that was pinned on an innocent man, who drowns himself rather than face prosecution in white-dominated courts.

Much of the action of the play involves discontent among black mill workers. This unrest results in the torching of the mill by Solly and Citizen Barlow, who have to flee from Caesar, the constable out to find the perpetrators of the unrest and subsequent fire.

As in all the plays in this cycle, *Gem of the Ocean* exudes an irony that demonstrates how it is almost impossible for poor African Americans to lead ethical lives in a society that is unwilling to grant them equal opportunities. If black people commit crimes far in excess of those committed by white people, then it is largely because their backs are to the wall in an unjust society.

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