



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival

2025 Study Guide



What is a Jitney?

In the context of August Wilson's play, set in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1977, a jitney is an unlicensed taxicab. It can also refer to a privately owned bus or shuttle service. The word comes from the French Creole "jetnée", meaning a nickel or five cents, which was the original fare price when they first appeared in 1914. Jitneys were a prominent and necessary mode of transportation in the 1970s for many underserved communities, providing an easy way to get around town for those who did not have access to a car or reliable public transportation, and there were many Jitney stations in Pittsburgh specifically. Regular taxicab companies could not be relied upon to consistently serve Black communities, nor would they hire Black drivers. Jitneys were a way to make some extra money, and to benefit Black neighborhoods in a self-contained and self-sufficient manner.

Jitneys began in Los Angeles in the early 20th century, and soon spread across the country. Over time, due to their impact on public transportation, the government passed regulations which caused a massive decline in popularity, though some still remained. They returned to prominence in the 1970s, as regulations loosened. Today they have evolved into private shuttle services, such as Uber and Lyft, yet they remain an example of African-American fortitude and resourcefulness.

Illustration from *Jitney*, OSF play art



Jitney by August Wilson



August Wilson

About the Playwright: August Wilson

Born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, to Daisy Wilson, an African-American housekeeper, and Frederick Kittel, a white baker who had emigrated from Germany to Pittsburgh. When August was a young boy, his father abandoned the family, leaving Daisy Wilson to raise the family on her own. He changed his name to August Wilson in 1965. He and his family lived in the Hill District, a Pittsburgh neighborhood that later provided the setting for most of his plays.

- ▶ Wilson quit high school as a teenager after a teacher wrongfully accused him of plagiarism. He later educated himself in Pittsburgh's libraries.
- ▶ Wilson began his writing career as a poet, influenced largely by the writings of political poet and playwright Amiri Baraka. His political interests led him to become involved in theatre in the late 1960s as a co-founder of Black Horizons, a Pittsburgh community theatre.
- ▶ August Wilson's best-known work is a ten-play series, the American Century Cycle, about the African American experience. The Cycle contained one play for each decade of the 20th century. Wilson died on October 2, 2005, leaving behind a body of work that makes him one of America's greatest playwrights.



The Number Man

The Numbers Game is a form of illegal gambling whose origins date back to the late 1800s. A precursor to today's legalized state lottery, it operated in cities across the country until the late '70s, primarily in poor and working-class neighborhoods, including many Black communities. It was even popular in organized crime in the '20s and '30s.

A version of the Numbers Game, called the policy game or policy gambling, flourished among African Americans for decades. Gamblers would select three numbers and place their bets with the "Number Man," who was responsible for collecting the money and betting slips. Winning numbers were chosen by various means, initially by lottery or roulette wheel, and later by methods such as numbers related to the New York Stock Exchange trades, or horse racing.

Often a charismatic and skilled mathematician, the Number Man was a fixture of the community. Small businesses such as barber shops, candy stores, and bars were used as betting parlors or collection points. Returns greater than 500 to 1 were possible in some cases, and bankers, who stood at the top of the chain of command, were often millionaires who lived lavish lifestyles, always taking a percentage of total winnings.

Costume design by Helen Q. Huang

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Who is August Wilson? What is his unique contribution to American theatre and history? What other plays has he written? What events in his life inspired him to write *Jitney*? These and other websites provide information:
<https://awaacc.org/about/about-august/>
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/August-Wilson>
2. Research August Wilson's ten-play American Century cycle about the African-American experience, of which *Jitney* is the eighth. These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/august-wilson-the-ground-on-which-i-stand-scenes-and-synposes-of-august-wilsons-10-play-cycle/3701/>
3. Research the Hill District in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.pittsburghbeautiful.com/2017/08/07/the-rich-history-of-pittsburghs-hill-district/>
<https://aaregistry.org/story/the-hill-district-pittsburgh/>
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_District_\(Pittsburgh\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_District_(Pittsburgh)) <https://augustwilsonhouse.org/>
4. August Wilson, an African-American playwright, puts the word "nigger" into the mouths of his African-American characters. Research the history and etymology of the word. How has the meaning of the word evolved over time (or has it)? How does the meaning of the word change according to context, perception, and/or who uses it? These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.etymonline.com/word/nigger> <https://aaregistry.org/story/nigger-the-word-a-brief-history/>
https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2326274
5. Research life for African Americans in Pittsburgh in the 1970s. What was it like for them? What occupations were available to them? What occupations were not? These and other websites provide information:
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_District_\(Pittsburgh\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hill_District_(Pittsburgh))
<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Pittsburgh
6. What does it mean to be a community? What characteristics define it? How do you know when you are part of a community? What are the benefits? Disadvantages?
7. Research gentrification. How does it impact different communities? Are there benefits? What are the disadvantages? These and other websites provide information:
<https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/gentrification/>
https://www.huffpost.com/entry/gentrification-types_n_5689050#:~:text=According%20to%20Saunders%2C%20there%20isn,Limited%20Gentrification%20and%20Nascent%20Gentrification. <https://www.urbandisplacement.org/about/what-are-gentrification-and-displacement/>



2025 *Jitney* set rendering, designed by Scott Bradley.

BECKER:
I taught you two wrongs don't make a right.

BOOSTER:
Sometime they do. Sometime you got to add it up that way. Otherwise it's just one wrong after another and you never get to what's right.

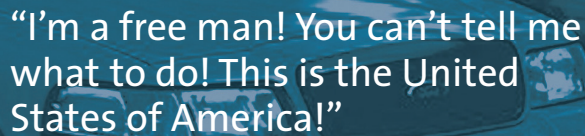
8. Research cars in the 1970s. Which were the most popular for African Americans in or near Pittsburgh? What factors went into this being the case? These and other websites provide information:
<https://nextpittsburgh.com/tony-norman/tony-norman-black-migrants-and-their-cars-in-pittsburgh-during-the-era-of-the-great-migration/>
<https://www.curbsideclassic.com/vintage-snapshots-and-photography/vintage-snapshots-black-americans-and-their-cars-1940s-1960s-2/>
9. Research race relations in the 1970s. What race-based challenges faced African Americans? What are some of the ways, positive or negative, in which they navigated these challenges? These and other websites provide information:
<https://nextpittsburgh.com/pittsburgh-for-all/the-hidden-racist-history-of-some-pittsburgh-neighborhoods/>
<https://www.archives.gov/research/african-americans/migrations/great-migration>
<https://pinjnews.org/historical-context-violence-occurring-against-black-pittsburghers-today-has-been-happening-for-more-than-a-century-and-a-half/>



Costume design by Helen Q. Huang

After seeing/reading the play

1. Discuss the relationships in the play. Which characters have previous relationships? Which characters have covert relationships? How do these relationships feed the tension and the conflict in the play?
2. What confers status in the world of the play? Describe each character's perception of their status. Describe each character's perception of the status of the other characters. Discuss how status changes for the characters.



"I'm a free man! You can't tell me what to do! This is the United States of America!"

3. Why do Turnbo and Youngblood come into conflict? What are their individual points of view? Why does it escalate to such a degree? Is there anything about Turnbo's character, or what he says, that suggests he would (or wouldn't) follow through with his threat if it came down to it?
4. Refer to your research on race relations in the '70s. What role does this play in the incident involving Booster's incarceration? How does this highlight the difficulties of being Black in America? Why does Booster feel that his actions were necessary? How does Becker's opinion differ?

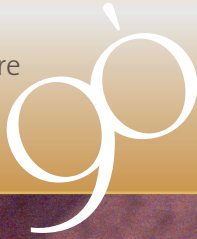


Costume design by Helen Q. Huang

5. In the world of the play, what confers power? In what ways is Becker powerful? In what ways is he powerless? Turnbo? Booster? Who else has power in the play? Who loses power, and why? Who gains power, and why?
6. Refer to your research on life in Pittsburgh. Why is Turnbo always in everyone's business? What might this say about him as a person? How might this be related to the idea of community?
8. Why does Becker continue to employ Fielding despite knowing he is an alcoholic? Why do the other drivers continue to support and/or tolerate him? What is the meaning of Fielding's dream? Why is it so important to him? How does his drinking impact his life? How might his relationship with his wife have impacted his life? How does he continue to evolve in the play?
9. Doub and Turnbo agree that money and women is what gets most people killed. In what ways are they right? In what ways might they be wrong? Discuss their point of view and why they have come to this conclusion.
10. Refer to your research on gentrification and Pittsburgh. Why must Becker and the others leave their current location? What problems does this present for them, both individually and collectively? What are their alternative options? How might this impact the community overall? What happens to the jitney station when the play is over?
11. Why do people choose to work for Becker? How do they describe him? What qualities in a supervisor seem to be important to them? How does he treat those who work for him? In what ways do Becker's Rules define the Jitney station and those who work there?
12. Refer to your research on race relations in the '70s. How might this influence Doub's explanation of "the white man" to Youngblood? How does Youngblood's opinion differ?
13. Refer to your research on popular cars in the '70s. How might the type of vehicle you own impact business? What are some reasons the Jitney drivers give to refuse pick-up? Why are the drivers so particular about where they go and who they pick up?
14. Discuss the relationship between Youngblood and Rena. Why is Rena angry with Youngblood? Why is she angry with him when she finds out that he is buying a house? Why are they able to move forward as a couple after being at odds?

Flash from the Past

For our **90th Anniversary Season** we thought it would be fun to share pictures of past productions of August Wilson plays.



Derrick Lee Weeden and LeWan Alexander in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 1993. Photo by Christopher Briscoe.



Josiah Phillips, Kenajuan Bentley and Terry Bellamy in *Two Trains Running*, 2013. Photo by Jenny Graham.



Greta Oglesby in *Gem of the Ocean*, 2007. Photo by Jenny Graham.

15. Refer to your research on African American life in Pittsburgh in the 1970s. Why was the jitney station important to the drivers? What other employment opportunities do they discuss in the play? How significant was the jitney income to their everyday lives?
16. How does the community respond to Becker's death? What does this tell you about this particular community? How does the community help Booster with his father's death?
17. How does Becker's death impact the jitney station and its drivers? Why might the playwright leave the future of the jitney station undefined? Discuss possible outcomes and decisions by the drivers. What happens next?
18. Many of this season's plays show characters who make deliberate choices to behave differently than their parents. How do you see younger generations working to avoid what they perceive to be the mistakes of their elders in *Fat Ham*, *As You Like It*, *Into the Woods*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *Shane*, and *Jitney*? Are there moments when younger generations choose to carry on the values, practices, or behaviors of their elders?

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