

## *Jitney*: Black is beautiful, and possible

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August Wilson, *Jitney*, dir. Renzo Carbonera, Vicenza, Teatro Astra, 12 May 2023

### ABSTRACT

The premiere of August Wilson's *Jitney*, directed by Renzo Carbonera at the Teatro Astra of Vicenza on 12 May 2023, is part of a larger project promoted by *La Piccionaia* Center in Vicenza, with the support of the US Consulate General in Milan, in collaboration with the August Wilson Legacy, Pittsburgh University, and Padua University. The premiere was a historical event, not only because it was the very first time that an Italian theatre had hosted an August Wilson play in Italian, but it was also the first time a cast made up only of Black Italian actors performed on stage. The quality of their performance confirmed that there is a sizable number of very good black actors trained in the most prestigious Italian schools and that the only thing that separates them from everyone else is opportunity.

### Keywords

August Wilson, *Jitney*, Black Italian actors, Black English, Italian translation

On 12 May 2023, the *Teatro Astra* in Vicenza witnessed the historical premiere of August Wilson's *Jitney*, directed by Renzo Carbonera: it was the very first time that an Italian theatre had hosted a play written by the greatest African American playwright, a performance with a cast made up of Black Italian actors. For this review, my only expertise derives from familiarity with the Black Italian acting scene, to which I dedicated my edited volume *L'Africa in Italia* (Aracne, 2013) and the blog *Cinematrodiscendente* (2014-20). Additionally, I had the privilege to be present at the session of open rehearsals at *Carrozzerie n.o.t.* on 4 April and at the premiere in Vicenza.

August Wilson (1945-2005) is known as the “theater’s poet of Black America.” Twice winner of the Pulitzer Prize, in 1987 for *Fences* and in 1990 for *The Piano Lesson*, Wilson left us the unique heritage of the American Century Cycle – a series of ten plays documenting poetically the African American experience in the 20th century, where he addresses issues such as exploitation, racism, identity, as seen through the Hill District, the Black suburb in Pittsburgh where he was born and raised. In his outstanding and controversial speech in 1996, *The Ground on Which I Stand*, Wilson described his search for universality through the great tradition of Western Theater, from Aeschylus to Ibsen through Shakespeare. At the same time,

he pronounced words of fire against an American scene which was neglecting black playwrights and erasing the deep culture of African Americans through dangerous practices such as colorblind casting. Despite the prestigious awards and a massive series of successful Broadway and off-Broadway stagings, with stars such as Angela Bassett, Viola Davis, Samuel L. Jackson and Denzel Washington, in Italy, Wilson's works have never been published in translation, and his name is mainly known only as the author of *Fences*, which inspired a feature film starring and directed by Washington, which earned Wilson a posthumous Academy Award in 2017.

Set in 1977, *Jitney* was the very first play written by Wilson, and it was to be staged for the first time in 1979 but performed in a Broadway theatre only in 2017. Less celebrated than other works in the Cycle, this two-act piece is developed in the unity of place and action during two days in a station for illegal taxis run by Black drivers for an audience of Black working-class customers and housewives, in the spirit of social civil service. The station, managed by the experienced Becker in his sixties, is in the Hill District, a suburb facing massive demolition work imposed by the local administration. A long-time widower, Becker finds himself having to decide on the very same day how to deal with the order to leave the place he has run for 18 years and how to face his son Booster, coming out of prison after a long sentence for the murder of a white girl. In addition to Becker, we meet a small community of drivers, customers, and visitors for whom the station has become a reference point; everyone facing the hardships of an experience made up of ordinary violence, where the risk of ending up on the street, in jail or a coffin is high. Yet, it is nevertheless possible to fight for a better life while knowing that the American dream is meant for white people.

Introducing Wilson to an Italian audience was not an easy task as he is a renowned master of African American English – a linguistic variety that is a direct expression of the oral tradition of the Black community, rich in inflexions complex to render in Italian. The translation of *Jitney* was accomplished by Angela Soldà with a project from Padua University under the supervision of Fiona Clare Dalziel and Anna Scacchi. Soldà knew how to bet successfully on the possibility of inventing a sharp Italian street talk with no local accents. A dozen or so occurrences of the N-word, although spoken in a context of proximity and between equals, does not pass unnoticed, as also the translation of *yellow gal* with the Italian word *mulatta*, but this was likely hard to avoid.

This theatrical production is part of a far more complex project promoted by *La Piccionaia* Center in Vicenza, with the support of the US Consulate General in Milan, in collaboration with the August Wilson Legacy, Pittsburgh University, and Padua University. The Wilson Project has a rich timeline, starting from July 2022 and including several intermediate workshops through art residences and open sessions realized in partnership with other network poles in Vicenza, Padua, Codroipo (Udine), and Rome. The artistic team included the playwright Fabrizio Arcuri

and the actor coach Tindaro Granata. From April to May 2023, the project was enriched by a multimedia workshop for students attending a technical senior high school with a program of screenings and four webinars on the multiple facets of The Wilson Project. If we must find fault in the ambitious initiative produced by *La Piccionaia*, it is in the timing of the premiere, scheduled at the end of the Winter Season, in a decentered small city like Vicenza and with the calendar of following shows still in progress.

Behind the project, you can see the strong will of Renzo Carbonera, a film director in his forties born near Udine with a part-German background like Wilson and two feature films coproduced by Rai Cinema, *Resina* (2018) and *Takeaway* (2021), appreciated by critics and in the film festival circuit. Carbonera, whose encounter with Wilson's legacy took place by chance in Pittsburgh during a film tour, took a considerable risk in quite a few basic choices, starting from the cast. We have here a stock of actors who are part of the same generation, from Alessandra Arcangeli (25) to Germano Gentile (38). At the same time, in Wilson's work, there are at least two characters in their 50s and 60s (Becker, who runs the jitney station, and Doub, a driver and a Korean War veteran), and two more between 40 and 50 years of age (drivers Turbo, always meddling in the business of others, and Fielding, a former tailor with drinking issues). More than that, he gave a double role to each of the four male actors, imposing on them a challenging tour de force characterized by frequent ins and outs, add-on changes and readjustments in diction, posture, and body language. Arcangeli was cast as well in a double role, as the housewife Rena and as a mute presence at the side on the stage, magically animating to sing and play at the scene, changing some classics of soul music by Nina Simone (how to forget her *Work Song* version?) and Marvin Gaye.

While it was not inscribed in the core representative realism of Wilson's work, Carbonera's direction aims at a mix of three modes, abstraction, minimalism, and antinaturalism, with essential décor and costumes, to say the least. The scenery is dominated by the incumbent presence of two big vertical liquid crystal screens where you can see, during the action – according to Wilson's notes – Becker's *rules* and prices of rates to different parts of the city while, at scene changes, you have images of daily life from the seventies in the US. The Jitney station is materialized through a small table, a sofa, a pouffe, and a few plastic chairs. Furnishings are deliberately sparse: the fundamental handset telephone, a chess board, a few magazines and little else. Costumes, too, follow this procedure: you have ordinary, black outfits with no reference to the historical frame, with a few add-ons (Becker's hat, Booster's gloves) mainly included to help the audience distinguish between the characters, some of them shining in a brilliant primary yellow – a true hallmark of the Wilson Project's graphic layout.

The overall outcome does not disappoint expectations, with the coolness of registers of Carbonera's stage direction balanced by the tense energy of the five emerging performers,

conducted with remarkable confidence even though this was his first time as a theater director. Each of the actors stands out for a key that, in a way, links their two roles: Germano Gentile for his solid presence, enriched by a few scratchy vocal mannerisms; Aaron Tewelde for his buoyant and controlled elocution; Yonas Aregai for his attentive grading of times and tones; Maurizio Bousso for a comedic lightness that helps to overshadow a few excesses in his body language; Alessandra Arcangeli (Hallyx in the recording field) for the intense expressions of her Rena role but also the warm and captivating tone of a true rising soul star.

I wish this theatrical production would find a wide and durable place in the Italian scene, a platform traditionally closed to actors and even more so to authors of African descent. This staging confirms evidence known to those who follow the Italian acting scene without blinders. The non-news is that we do have a consistent supply of Black actors and actresses trained in prestigious schools, such as Accademia Silvio d'Amico in Roma (Arcangeli and Tewelde), Teatro di Roma (Aregay), Teatro Stabile in Genova (Bousso), Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia (Gentile, Miguel Gobbo Diaz, Haroun Fall), Paolo Grassi in Milan (Esther Elisha, Rosanna Sparapano, Marouane Zotti, and Alberto Boubakar Malanchino), Piccolo Teatro in Milan (Martina Sammarco): many of them have appeared with remarkable success on stage, films and TV mini-series. Before them came another generation of actors, now in their 40s, including Nadia Kibout, Ashai Lombardo Arop, Balkissa Maiga, and Alfie Nze. A solid background and an even richer experience are the added values of some who joined the Italian stage and film scene already in the 1980s and 1990s, from the veteran Antonio Campobasso to Felicité Mbezele, through to Salvatore Marino, Jonis Bascir and Rufin Doh Zeyenouin. Some emerging stars, such as Caterina Deregibus and Gamey Guilavogui Malatesta, have been completely forgotten. The multicultural Italy of 2023 has talent to spare; we are missing roles and courage to support a movement on its way despite everything. To misquote Viola Davis in her memorable speech on women of color at the Emmy Awards in 2015, in Italy, too, the only thing that separates actors of color from everyone else is opportunity.

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