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ENTERTAINMENT

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ACTORS, DIRECTOR AT SYRACUSE STAGE DISSECT AUGUST WILSON'S FINAL PLAY



TUNING INTO

RADIO GOLF

**RICHARD BROOKS** (left) plays Harmond Wilks, Thomas Jefferson Byrd (center) is Elder Joseph Barlow, and G. Valmont Thomas is Roosevelt Hicks in the Syracuse Stage production of August Wilson's "Radio Golf," which opens Friday.

By **Diep Tran**  
Contributing writer

**S**peaking with the cast of Syracuse Stage's production of August Wilson's "Radio Golf" is like sitting down with Wilson scholars. On one side of the table, there's director Timothy Bond, who has made the presentation of Wilson's 10-play "20th Century Cycle" his goal as producing artistic director of Syracuse Stage.

On the other side is Richard Brooks, who originated and is reprising the lead role of Harmond Wilks in "Radio Golf" and G. Valmont Thomas, who worked with Bond at Oregon Shakespeare Festival. "I think every black actor has a running tally, 'Can I be in all 10 of these plays? Is that possible?'" says Thomas.

"Radio Golf" marks his fourth Wilson play, the third with Bond at the helm. He plays Roosevelt Hicks, the friend and business partner of Harmond. His character also is an avid golfer.

"I hadn't thought about that, but that is an interesting tally to make,"

says Brooks. He begins quietly ticking off Wilson plays he had acted in on his fingers. "This one, 'Jitney,' 'King Hedley II,' 'Fences'..." Brooks may be familiar to TV audiences from his role as Paul Robinette, an assistant district attorney, in the early years of "Law & Order" in the 1990s.

**CRACKING THE CODE**

It's another rehearsal day for "Radio Golf," which opens Friday. Set in Pittsburgh in 1997, the play is about Harmond's attempt to become the first black mayor of Pittsburgh.

Concurrently, he and his best friend, Roosevelt, try to renovate the Hill District, once an affluent African-American neighborhood that has slowly fallen into disrepair and poverty. It is also the setting for nine of the cycle's plays. Wilson enthusiasts may recognize the Wilks name from another "Cycle" play, "Gem of the Ocean," and its character Caesar Wilks. Caesar is Harmond's grandfather.

Such small details speak to the intricacy of the "20th Century



Photos © T. Charles Erickson / Courtesy of Syracuse Stage

**BROOKS** plays the central character, who is trying to become the first black mayor of Pittsburgh. For a photo gallery from the play, go to [syracuse.com/photos](http://syracuse.com/photos).

**The details**

**What:** "Radio Golf" by August Wilson.

**Where:** Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee St., Syracuse.

**When:** Through March 13.

**Tickets:** Adults, \$25 to \$48; 18 and younger, \$16, Students, \$15. Call 443-3275 or go to [www.syracusestage.org](http://www.syracusestage.org).

**The Hill in Syracuse**

In conjunction with "Radio Golf," two exhibitions will be presented at Syracuse Stage. In the Coyne Lobby, the Onondaga Historical Society has organized a seven-panel presentation on the African-American community in the 15th Ward in Syracuse, a neighborhood similar to the Hill District in Pittsburgh. The second exhibition features photographs by Marjory Wilkins in the Sutton Pavilion.



# Playwright died before 'Radio Golf' premiered

## PLAYWRIGHT, FROM PAGE C-1

Cycle," and how familial, community and racial bonds can span and multiply within a period of 100 years. Characters, locations and motifs repeat themselves in the various plays, clues scattered about for Wilson scholars to find. "It's like that movie with Tom Hanks where he's finding clues ... 'The Da Vinci Code,'" says Brooks. "We're cracking the August Wilson Code in this play."

## When a house is not just a house

Most of the conflict in "Radio Golf" centers around a house with a red door, scheduled to be torn down in Harmond and Roosevelt's renovation project. The house belonged to Aunt Ester Tyler, a recurring character in the cycle, who first appears in "Gem of the Ocean." Another piece in the Wilson Code.

The house symbolizes the tension between the past and the present, something Harmond struggles with. That struggle is personified by his inability to tear down the house.

"For African-Americans, in order to be independent and free and successful, does that

mean you have to cut off the ties you have with your community? And how do you negotiate that?" says Bond. "For Harmond, he's in some questioning."

By contrast, Harmond's best friend, Roosevelt, has wholly embraced the middle-class lifestyle and consequently abandoned his ties to the African-American community. He advocates tearing down Aunt Ester's house, despite its historical significance. Thomas clarifies his thinking, even if he personally does not agree.

"I think Roosevelt feels like he's very American," Thomas says. "'We got free, and we're supposed to join this society. And that's the way this society is run, that's how I'm going to do it.'"

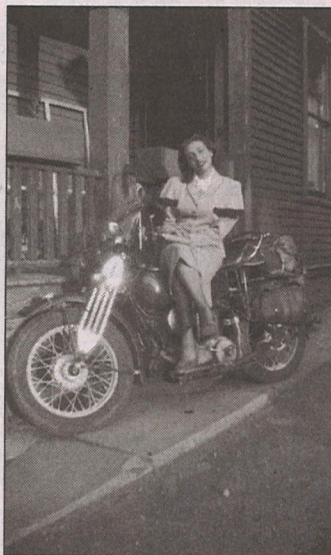
"That's the game," Bond intones.

"That's the game," Thomas says.

## The ghost of August

"Radio Golf" is the last play in the cycle and Wilson's final work. The playwright died shortly before it premiered.

Brooks was in the original 2005 Yale Repertory Theatre



© Marjory Wilkins

**AS PART OF "Radio Golf,"** Syracuse Stage is presenting two photo displays about African-American life in Syracuse. Above is "Gloria on Motorcycle, 1949," a photo Marjory Wilkins, of Syracuse, took of Gloria Rohadfox outside 418 E. Adams St. on a visitor's motorcycle.

production and considers himself honored to have been chosen by Wilson to play Harmond Wilks.

"It felt special . . . we all felt like August had chosen us

because he wanted to spend time with us in some kind of way," Brooks says. "He always told me that he was listening to our voices. So he had written it with my voice in mind."

A pause follows this last statement, a sense of reverence hanging in the air. "I just get chills thinking about that," says Bond, visibly shivering. Wilson had been a friend.

## The here and now

"Radio Golf" first premiered on Broadway in 2007 and was nominated for a Tony for best play. It closed after 64 performances.

To the director and actors at the table, the play has more resonance in 2011, especially with the ascension of Barack Obama to the White House. To them, it's as if Wilson had some power of foresight, ensuring that his last work would only increase in relevancy after his death. "It's just prescient," Bond says. "(August) just saw it on the horizon and knew the dilemma someone in that kind of situation, be they mayor or president, would have to deal with in their past and their community."

He then adds with a laugh. "I wish Obama could come and see this production."