

## Chapter VIII

### Creating Out of Nothing: *Jitney*

The Black Power Movement of the 1960s, no doubt, brought significant change to the quality of black life in the United States. Yet the dissatisfaction was so deep in the black community during the 1970s that just some developments were not enough to reduce it. Many blacks had become so frustrated that they were inclined to interpret individual advancement in public and private sectors as nothing more than cunning designs of whites to buy off, and thus to silence, their most talented and influential leaders. Thirty-one percent of blacks were still living below the poverty line and 13.2 percent were jobless. Even in jobs chances for them to move up were greatly restricted by meager opportunities for apprenticeship training and discrimination in many labor unions. In 1971 the Gallup Poll reported that twenty-five percent of the black population was dissatisfied with the quality of community life (Franklin 491-94). Small wonder that there was considerable unrest among blacks as they headed toward the 1970s.

Set in 1971 Pittsburg, *Jitney* (1982) explores the confrontations inherent in the day-to-day struggle of blacks for living. It derives its name from the unlicensed, privately owned "taxis" that bring passengers to parts of the city avoided

by licensed cabdrivers. The play is the product of a real experience that Wilson underwent during a visit to his hometown of Pittsburgh. One day, he hailed a jitney and was struck by the energy of the people who ran these car services: "These guys would just get an abandoned storefront and put a pay phone in there and disseminate the number throughout the community and go into business, thereby creating something out of nothing. These were guys who sent their kids to college driving jitneys" (qtd. in Herrington 114).

Like *Two Trains Running*, *Jitney* has one set: a dilapidated storefront used as jitney dispatch station. Service requests come via a pay telephone hanging on the wall. While demolition, murder, and incarceration seem to suggest the stereotype, *Jitney* hangs much more on its atmosphere, presenting extraordinary verisimilitude in its portrayal of a group of struggling African-American men. It abounds in experiences that include war, alcoholism, lost love, skirmishes with the law, and continued disappointment. The characters are more than types; some are highly individualized. Turnbo is a bitter man who fills his days with a running ironic commentary on the lives of his colleagues; and his favorite target, Youngblood, a twenty-four-year-old Vietnam veteran, is trying to build a life for his family. Youngblood's energy contrasts with the resignation of

Fielding, a drinker who still dreams of his wife, dead twenty-two years ago. Doub, a steady worker, remains optimistic despite the battle he has fought in and out of war. All of them are jitney drivers whose station is owned by Becker who holds these men together while struggling with his estrangement from his son, Booster, who was imprisoned for murder twenty-five years earlier. With these men is Shealy, a numbers runner who uses the station as his office.

Day after day the drivers fan out into the neighborhood to pick up their fares as they have done for years, only to learn that they will soon face the closing of the station and the loss of their livelihood. In this play, however, Wilson is more concerned with the creation of new, vivid images of blacks and has deliberately tried to expand the dramatic world beyond the rather narrow ethos of their helplessness. He alludes to the expectations raised by some progress in the 1960s that change will bring them prosperity and genuine respect. He deals with the issues of how blacks should best proceed in their struggle for survival with dignity. Above all, Wilson comprehensively raises the ethical issues that must be confronted if they are to realize those ideals in whose name the civil rights movement has been won.

Even in the 1970s, blacks in *Jitney* are living below the poverty line and for them America has no jobs. No doubt, the civil rights movement has brought some changes in the relationship between blacks and whites, but the structure of society that determines the nature of contact has remained essentially the same. These blacks are part of an economy, stuck in a life that has them driving jitneys, and are the people who have pride but hardly anything else. While waiting for the pay phone to ring (usually for the summons of a customer for a cheap cross-town shuttle), they play craps, hit each other up for small loans, berate and console each other, get drunk, get mad, get fired and, best of all, tell stories. But they are not hopeless, nor are they more ineffectual dreamers. They are strong despite stark social conditions and think in terms of progress. These blacks are challenged to act, and their responses reveal their basic fighting spirit.

What is more provocative, however, is that *Jitney* reveals the potency of black integration. While there are skeptics like Fielding, the others are convinced that only total effort by the black community to achieve their independence will break the yoke of white oppression. These people hope that good, honest labor will bear success as its fruit. Becker and his drivers together hang on to what they have gotten and are engaged in the

struggle to rise above their present situation in the face of such leveling gusts. Their collective struggle to move ahead is the struggle that shapes most human endeavor. These blacks are bound in their effort to a common end of liberation. Their approaches to the goal of freedom are coextensive, interdependent, and conjoined. What so palpably characterizes such collaboration is a desire for self-definition and self-determination beyond the reality of black marginality. They combine their efforts to rid themselves of white ethnocentrism and to stress the survival of minority culture. Excluded from the center, they have developed their own culture that not only functions within their own setting but also compensates for the discrimination they have long suffered. They promise to adhere to the rules that they themselves have made: "No overcharging; Keep car clean; No drinking; Replace and clean tools" (Jitney 11).

One who breaks the rules is subject to be dismissed from membership of the station. They drive jitney not just to make money but also to do what is better for their community. They are, as Becker says, "providing a service to the community. We ain't just giving rides to people. We providing a service. That's why you answer the phone 'Car service'. You don't say Becker's Cabs or Joe's Jitney's" (Jitney 86). These blacks make

themselves feel better about themselves and their place in America because everyone has now understood that "This is a free country! I'm a free man! You can't tell me what to do! This is the United States of America" (*Jitney* 50). In Marion Isaac McClinton's words:

They [seem to] say: "This here is our place," a place that is inherited, just like our blood and bones, a place where stories live that help to define who we have been and who we are, so we might wonder at the possibilities of who we can be. This is our place to stand upon, so that we can snatch the future and claim it forever, never to lose it again. (Introduction to *Jitney* 8)

Such understanding gives them a purpose and direction in life: to serve their community. By serving the community they try to find their true place in the U.S. society.

The union of Youngblood and Rena represents the bond between black men and black women. Their son, Jesse, is symbolic of all that fructifies out of the bond. Youngblood is as bound to Rena by his love as she is to him by will: "I want you baby . . . I told you that. You already my pride. I want you to be my joy" (*Jitney* 77), he tells her. This sense of love creates in him the sense of responsibility, respect for

authority, and a clear life plan. Becker thinks he has found in Youngblood what he has lost with the fate of his own son. Youngblood works hard day and night to buy a house and give his family "someplace decent to live" (*Jitney* 74). "For many Americans," says Helen Keyssar, "the act of purchasing one's own house clearly signifies upward mobility and membership in the middle class" (142). Youngblood's family is moving up to that standard. Both Youngblood and Rena attempt with determination to do the heavy lifting that true love calls for and try to make a decent and better life for their son. Their effort suggests what survival might look like, if parents were true to their responsibilities for the progeny. Symbolically, their union also reworks the Edenic image of creation. Youngblood, as the new Adam, and Rena, as the new Eve, seem to be ready to start the historical process of the creation of a new race of black people.

After twenty years' imprisonment for murder, Booster tries to reconnect with his estranged father. Yet, at the same time, he remains the uncompromising voice of black militancy. Twenty years ago he had killed the rich white society girl because she falsely testified against him as a rapist. Instead of seeking an escape, he chose "to resist" what Malcolm X calls "the white avalanche" (qtd. in Marable 54). Like Malcolm X, his conflict

is with the oppressive and mechanized social system. He therefore protests, confronts, and pre-empts the forces that drives him toward servitude--he would choose death as freedom rather than submit to the indignity and injustice of exploitation. His denial of white superiority, his rejection of white oppression, and his display that black endurance has its limits, express African-American disgust with the prevailing system. Coming out of the penitentiary, he is not worried about his survival. What he seeks to do is to make a history, rather than compromise with the world. His way of responding to this world is in marked contrast to the way his father responds.

The difference between Becker and Booster is obliquely reminiscent of the division of black Americans into two groups--the "integrationists" and the "separatists." It implies the ideological differences that defined the black freedom movement of the 1960s: the division between the integrationists led by Martin Luther, who sought cultural inclusion and reforms within the system, and the black nationalists following Malcolm X, who championed black separatism, militancy, and protest.

BECKER. Proud of you for killing somebody!

BOOSTER. No, Pop. For being a warrior. For dealing with the world in ways that you didn't or couldn't or wouldn't. (*Jitney 57*)

Becker, is also a fighter because he too seeks an overthrow of white supremacy. But he could not rebel as he believed that militant protests would deprive his family or his people of whatever little they had to sustain themselves. Instead, he aims at generating resources within his own community to empower it for its own well being. He acts as a disseminator of thought, of the collective will of a large segment of his people. He sets an important pattern for others to follow. He too defies, but in a non-violent manner. He calls a meeting of the drivers to discuss how they can fight the closing of the station. Becker's decision to fight the case legally, to lead the men, and to increase their self-respect reflects his iron will to wage a war, but on his own terms. Wilson says, "he's [Becker] not just going to take what's given, what's presented to him; he's going to stand up" (qtd. in Herrington 128).

The relationship between Becker and Booster forms the core of the play. Becker deeply resents Booster and sees him as a murderer twice over, holding him responsible for the loss of his wife who died shortly after Booster was sentenced. He still feels devastated by the crushing of all the dreams he once held for his son. Contrarily, Booster clashes with his father for accepting what life doles out without a fight:

I don't know if you knew it Pop, but you were a big man. Everywhere you went people treated you like a big man. . . . That day when Mr. Rand came to the house it was snowing. You came out on the porch and he started shouting and cussing and threatening to put us out in the street where we belonged. I was waiting for you to tell him to shut up . . . to get off your porch. But you just looked at him and promised you would have the money next month. Mama came to the door and Mr. Rand kept shouting and cussing. I looked at mama . . . she was trying to get me to go in the house . . . and I looked at you . . . and you had got smaller. The longer he shouted the smaller you got. When we went back to the barbershop you didn't seem so big no more. You was the same size as everybody else. You was just another man in the barbershop. That's when I told myself if I ever got big I wouldn't let nothing make me small. (*Jitney* 56-7)

Yet, the father and son seek to get over their "minor" differences in order to seek a solution to their common problem. Becker shows new lines that make a clear statement about his hope for a reconciliation with his son: "Say Doub . . . my boy been around here? You seen him?" (*Jitney* 87). As Wilson moves

toward revealing a deeper bond between the father and son, he justifies what is probably most significant for the progress of black Americans. After Becker's funeral, all of the drivers return to the jitney station. Booster joins them briefly. Then, as he turns to leave, the phone begins to ring. A moment passes and then Booster picks up the receiver and says, "Car Service." The son has come full circle, into his father's shoes.

After his father's death Booster recognizes the clues his father had left behind. He understands what it means to be working hard together peacefully: an understanding, which generates its own special form of power in the struggle to resist and overcome racial subordination and terror. He once had heroic notions, but he now understands how true heroism can be achieved. He says:

the only thing I ever knew him to do was work hard.  
It didn't matter to me too much at the time cause I  
couldn't see it like I see it now. He had his ways  
. . . I'm proud of my old man. I'm proud of him.  
And I'm proud to be Becker's boy. (*Jitney* 96)

Finally, by taking over the charge of his father's jitney station, Booster starts growing bigger. What now distinguishes him from many other blacks is his transformed awareness. We

expect that the rest of his life will be devoted to the uplift of the condition of his people rather than to the killing of whites.

Surrender to white supremacy is death. The play makes it equally clear that Becker has to die because he retreats to the life he had abandoned long before. It is Becker's financial failure that causes his destruction, and ultimately his death. Intellectually and emotionally capable of supporting his family, he is ultimately unable to find a job that pays enough to support them physically. His only alternative is to return to the same low paid hazardous job--the job in a mill with old machines--which he had left many years before. In this light, his retreat points to his painful realization that the black man is so powerless in America that it is difficult for him to sustain his freedom. What ultimately destroys Becker's body is a "capitalist bullet"; what destroys his spirit is prejudice--the big white fog that denies him all dignity and thrusts its deadly cancer into the very heart of the black community, including his family. The matter here is not disillusionment, but having all roads blocked from the outside. Becker, once again, becomes a victim of the same urban anonymity and disharmony that so many blacks confronted after their migration from the South to the North at the beginning of the century.

Most painfully, his death can be viewed as the murder of blacks who seek to survive with freedom and dignity. The portrait that Wilson paints--of the gruesome effects on black identity and experience of the white myths with all their derivative forms of oppression--is stark; and clearly his intention is to present the black reality. Becker's death, no doubt, suggests that black people continue to live with fewer options, but then it is also necessary for them to open, with their collective efforts, all the blocked roads and head toward making a world of their own.

Thus, in *Jitney*, Wilson attempts to portray the complexity of black life in America and offers supportive values. His characters strive for a freedom that always accompanies deeper self-knowledge and a genuine understanding of their place in America. In this sense *Jitney* is a journey toward the liberation of black Americans from the remnants of an oppressive system. Further, the play is, as McClinton refers in his introduction to a viewer's comment, not just black people's story, but who they are. It is not their story, it is their truth, the facts of the matter concerning their life in the land of the free and the home of the brave people (*Jitney* 8). Wilson writes, as he himself puts it, about "the unique particulars of black culture . . . I wanted to place this culture onstage in

all its richness and fullness and to demonstrate its ability to sustain us . . . through profound moments in our history in which the larger society has thought less of us than we have thought of ourselves" (*Jitney*, back cover).