



PHOTO COURTESY OF PASSINART THEATRE COMPANY

Tim Golden, left, plays Hambone and James Dixon plays Sterling in PassinArt Theatre Company's production of "Two Trains Running."

# A play that parallels Portland's gentrification

*PassinArt's production of August Wilson's 'Two Trains Running' portrays issues afflicting black communities*

**BY JOHN MICHAEL SPROLES**  
STAFF WRITER

Today, Portland is considered by many as a hub that champions progressive values. But events today and in the past paint a much different and painful story for African-Americans who have grappled with increased economic development and gentrification.

PassinArt Theatre Company's production of August Wilson's "Two Trains Running" gets to the heart of this, albeit in a different time and setting. But issues that have plagued black communities in the past still linger today. The African-American theater company's mission has always centered on entertaining, educating and inspiring artists and audiences while addressing critical issues in the community through affordable theatrical productions, readings and educational workshops.

The play is the seventh in Wilson's 10-part series "The Pittsburgh Cycle," which explores the heritage and experience of African-Americans decade by decade over the course of the 20th century. His plays have been produced at theaters around the world and have earned many awards, including Pulitzer Prizes for "Fences" and "The Piano Lesson," and eight New York Drama Critics Circle Awards.

A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for Drama,

"Two Trains Running" is set in a diner at 1621 Wylie Avenue, in Pittsburgh's Hill District, where Wilson was born and raised. In the 1940s and 1950s, this district was one of the most prosperous, culturally active black neighborhoods in the United States. By the 1960s, the neighborhood had suffered a sharp economic decline, which caused many black-owned businesses to close.

The production is set in 1969, when the civil rights movement was sweeping across the district. Memphis Lee's diner is scheduled to be torn down, a casualty of Pittsburgh's renovation project. Struggling to cope with the rapidly changing world, Lee and diner regulars fight to hang onto their solidarity and sense of community.

One of the reasons PassinArt put on the play was to honor black businesses lost to gentrification in North and Northeast Portland. And Wilson's ability to give epic proportion to everyday life allows the opportunity for audiences to explore the social and psychological manifestations of changing attitudes toward race from the perspective of the characters in the work.

"Hopefully this production gives people an understanding of black America, that we're still fighting some of these battles," director William Earl Ray said. "The gossip, the debates, philosophizing and storytelling

that take place in the restaurant reflect the oral tradition of African-American culture. It's one of my favorites."

To help audiences draw connections between the setting of "Two Trains Running" and some of Portland's very own neighborhoods, PassinArt has also partnered with an exhibit titled "Portland's Lost Black Neighborhoods." The exhibit, which premiered in 2011 at a forum at the Kaiser Town Hall in North Portland, highlights life in black communities that were devastated by industrial development, urban renewal and flooding. Guild's Lake Court, South Albina, Fairview Homes and Vanport City are some of the neighborhoods featured. Before, during and after the show, audiences can walk through the exhibit in the upstairs area of the Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, where the play is being shown.

The poster boards that line the room display historical photos and information about black-owned businesses, segregation fostered by real estate interests, Lower Albina – once known as the black community's downtown district – and more.

"It's a clear look into what's going on in North Portland," said Jerry Foster, PassinArt's artistic director. "There are folks who are being pushed out. Those folks were the patrons for many black businesses, and those businesses go out of business. The play parallels what's happening here."

Many of the black-owned businesses that once crowded areas in North Portland have

## IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** PassinArt Theatre Company's production of August Wilson's "Two Trains Running"

**WHEN:** 7:30 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sundays through April 1

**WHERE:** Interstate Firehouse Cultural Center, 5340 N. Interstate Ave., Portland

**TICKETS:** [passinart.org](http://passinart.org)

**INFORMATION:** [info@passinart.org](mailto:info@passinart.org) or 503-235-8079

vanished. The former black communities there have largely disappeared, replaced by a wave of new condos, restaurants, and Black Lives Matter signs.

According to data compiled by the city, the median income for black Portland households is roughly \$30,000; a family would have to spend 80 percent of that amount to rent a median-priced two-bedroom apartment in North Portland. The median income for white households is more than twice as high, \$67,000. This massive racial wealth gap was fostered by historically racist policies and practices that systematically excluded black people from opportunities to own homes.

Ray, who is also acting in the play, hopes that audiences will make many discoveries as they take a ride with the actors on the train. This isn't the first time, or the last, that a PassinArts production will engage and challenge audiences to think critically about devastating issues in Portland.

"We've put on productions that have subject matter that include AIDS in the black community, mental illness, gun violence," Foster said. "Theater is a mechanism used as a platform for discussion, and what we're trying to do here is give people a reference point to start a conversation. Don't just read about it; come see it."