

WE
BUILT
A
GREAT
PLAY
FOR

FENCES



BY AUGUST WILSON

MARCH 5 • 30, 1996

The play takes place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in the year 1957. It is the story of Troy Maxson, a charismatic man struggling with the racial injustices that have restricted his life and the life of his family. Troy was once a baseball player, but could not play professionally because of his color. His anger is heightened by the fact that Jackie Robinson, a player he considers to be average, broke the color barrier long after Troy was no longer eligible to play.

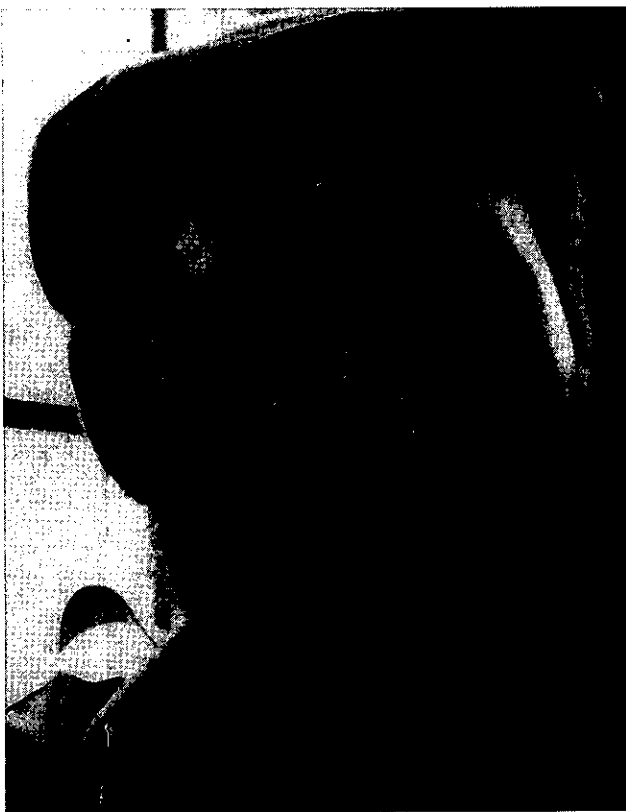
Troy's wife, Rose, is as accepting and calm as Troy is angry. During the course of the play, we discover that Troy is having an affair with a local woman, Alberta, and that he has made her pregnant. Rose, although she is angry and deeply hurt, still raises the child as her own when Alberta dies in childbirth.

Troy also has two sons: Lyons, the son of a previous marriage, and Cory, who is being recruited to play college football. Troy often quarrels with his sons; he resents that Lyons comes to visit only when he wants to borrow money, and he does not want Cory to waste time on athletics only to be hurt by discrimination the way he was hurt. And although he would never admit it, Troy may be jealous

of Cory's opportunity, an opportunity Troy never had.

Troy is also ridden with guilt about his brother, Gabriel, who was wounded in the war. Because of the financial compensation Gabriel's family received, Troy was able to buy his house, to have his family. Troy is haunted by the fact that, were it not for his brother's loss—a loss incurred while fighting for a nation that still gives his race few rights—Troy would not enjoy the few comforts he has.

This is a play about anger; anger against a society that allows a man to die for his country but does not allow him to play baseball. It is a play about limitations—fences—that blacks are not allowed to cross. It is a play about family, groups of people who try to nurture each other and create an equality, if only within the confines of a fence that surrounds the yard. It is a play about escape—laughing with a friend on the porch after work, telling stories of even harder times—escape which Troy ultimately seeks in the house of another woman. But the struggle he tries to escape is always there, and the only solace is within the fence that surrounds his own house. ★



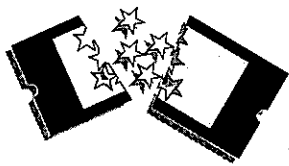
Playwright August Wilson

"THAT IS THE STORY OF *FENCES*, WHICH WE BUILD TO KEEP THINGS AND PEOPLE OUT OR IN."

—LLOYD RICHARDS

INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE

140 WEST WASHINGTON STREET • INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA 46204 • LIBBY APPEL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR



August BUILDING A HI

"JESUS, BE A FENCE ALL AROUND ME EVERY DAY.

JESUS, I WANT YOU TO PROTECT ME AS I TRAVEL ON MY WAY."

—ROSE, *FENCES*

Playwright August Wilson has undertaken an ambitious, systematic project.

He is writing plays which chronicle the African American experience decade by decade. Set in a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* portrays a man in search of "his song"—that elusive element which would make his life meaningful. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* focuses on a recording studio in 1927 Chicago and examines the consequences of black rage which can find no other outlet for expression except violence. Set in 1936 Pittsburgh, *The Piano Lesson* (1990 Pulitzer Prize winner) centers around a family's conflict over the legacy of an heirloom piano. In *Seven Guitars*, set in the 1940s, the plans of several Pittsburgh musicians to form a group and make it big in Chicago are destroyed by an act of senseless violence. *Fences*, set in 1957, warns of the dangers of bitterness and the importance of hope. *Two Trains Running* moves to the volatile 1960s, where a mentally impaired handyman refuses to accept the role of victim in a racist society. August Wilson explains, "I'm taking each decade and looking back at one of the most important questions that blacks confronted in that decade and writing a play about it. Put them all together and you have a history."

August Wilson was born April 27, 1945, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Although he had a white father, Wilson states that the "nurturing, the learning" of his life were "all black ideas about the world that I learned from my mother. My mother's a very strong woman. My female characters like Rose come in large part from my mother."

Wilson attended Gladstone High School until 1961, when he dropped out at age fifteen. Unlike most dropouts, Wilson did not leave school because he couldn't read. "I was bored," he explains. "I was confused, I was disappointed in myself, and I didn't do any work until my history teacher assigned

us to write a paper on a historical personage."

Wilson chose Napoleon because he had always been fascinated with the "self-made emperor." It was a twenty-page paper, and Wilson's sister typed it up on a rented typewriter. Since Wilson had previously done no work in class, his instructor found it hard to believe that it was his own work. He wrote both an A+ and then an F on the paper. If Wilson couldn't prove that the paper was his own, he would receive the failing grade. "I had my bibliography and my footnotes," explains Wilson. "I felt that was all the explanation I

"I STARTED *FENCES* WITH THE IMAGE OF A MAN STANDING IN HIS YARD WITH A BABY IN HIS ARMS."

—AUGUST WILSON



James Earl Jones as Troy Maxson in the original Yale Repertory Theatre production of Fences.

should give." He took the failing grade, tore the paper up, threw it in his teacher's wastebasket, and walked out of school. He did not go back.

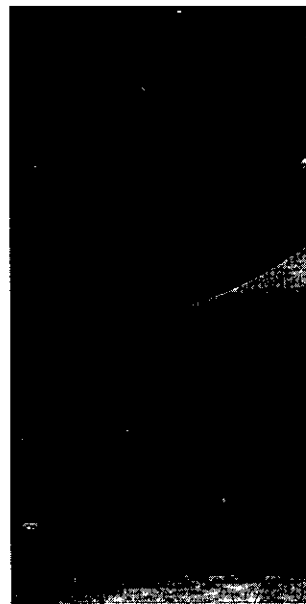
"The next morning," Wilson remembers, "I got up and played basketball right underneath the principal's window. As I look back on it, I see I wanted him to come and say, 'Why aren't you in school?' so I could tell someone. And he never came out."

After Wilson turned twenty, he spent the next ten to fifteen years "hanging out on street-corners, following old men around, working odd jobs." Then Wilson discovered a place called Par's Cigar Store in Pittsburgh. "It was the same place that Claude McKay mentioned in his book *Home to Harlem*," he recalls. "When I found out about that, I said, 'This is part of history,' and I ran down there to where all the old men in the community would congregate."

In 1968, Wilson co-founded Pittsburgh's Black Horizon Theatre Company. He began writing one-act plays during the height of the Black Power movement as a way, he says, to "politicize the community and raise consciousness."

Wilson originally channeled his literary efforts into poetry. He maintains that the "one thing that has best served me as a playwright is my background in poetry." His move to

**"FOR EVERY LOU
HUNDRED PEOPLE**



Charles S. Dutton in the original production of Fences.

Wilson

STORY IN PLAYS

Minnesota in the early 1970's served as a catalyst, permitting those colloquial voices and his skills as a dramatist to flourish.

Wilson did not think of himself as a playwright, however, until he received his first writing grant in the late 1970s. "I walked in,"

**ARMSTRONG THERE ARE A
HOSE TALENTS GET WASTED."**
—AUGUST WILSON



Day production of Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.

he remembers of his first encounter at the Playwright's Center, "and there were sixteen playwrights. It was the first time I had dinner with other playwrights. It was the first time I began to think of myself as one."

It was this grant that allowed Wilson to rework a one-act about a blues recording session into what became the full-length *Ma Rainey*. It was this play that caught the attention of Lloyd Richards, artistic director of the Eugene O'Neill Theatre Center and Dean of the Yale School of Drama. Richards directed *Ma Rainey* and most of Wilson's subsequent dramas. This partnership has been one of the most productive collaborations in American theatre. Almost all of Wilson's plays have premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre prior to their Broadway runs.

Fences was initially presented as a staged reading at the O'Neill Theatre Center at the 1983 Playwright's Conference. *Fences* opened on April 30, 1985, at the Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, with James Earl Jones in the role of Troy and Mary Alice as Rose. Both won Tony Awards in the 1987 Broadway production, as did director Richards. The play itself won the Tony Award as well as the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, the Outer Critics Circle Award, and the Drama Desk Award.

Thus, Wilson has and will continue to

**"WHEN THE SINS OF THE
FATHERS VISIT US, WE DO
NOT HAVE TO PLAY HOST.
WE CAN BANISH THEM WITH
FORGIVENESS AS GOD IN
HIS LARGENESS AND LAWS."**

—AUGUST WILSON



Delroy Lindo and Kellie S. Williams
in the Arena Stage production of
Joe Turner's Come and Gone.

record a dramatic history of the African American. Today, however, he prefers the label "cultural nationalist."

"An interviewer once asked me if having written these plays I hadn't exhausted the black experience. I said, 'Wait a minute. You've got 40,000 movies and plays about the white experience and we don't ask you if you've exhausted your experience.' I'll never run out of material," Wilson explains. "If I finish this cycle, I'll just start over again. You can write forever about the clash between the urban North and the rural South, what happened when blacks came to the cities, how their lives changed and how it affected generations to come." ★

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare treatment of African Americans in society today versus the 1950s. What things have changed? What things still need to be changed?
2. Do you think Troy is wrong to keep Cory from playing football? Why or why not?
3. Why do you think Troy resents loaning Lyons money so much? Have you ever lent someone something even though you didn't want to? Why did you lend it?
4. Why does Troy think Rose wants him to build a fence around their yard? Why is the idea of a fence so important in this play?
5. Whose outlook on life do you most admire in the play?
6. *Fences* starts in the year 1957. The last scene of the play takes place in 1965. What changes have taken place in those eight years, both for the characters and the nation? ★

CIVIL RIGHTS IN *America*

A TIMELINE OF IMPORTANT EVENTS LEADING TO THE BIRTH OF AUGUST WILSON'S HISTORY IN PLAYS

Despite the fact that the United States government granted full rights of citizenship to its African American population in the 1860s, through the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments to the Constitution, it was nearly a century before the practices of segregation were fully outlawed.

August Wilson writes of the world in which "Jim Crow" laws—local and state practices which limited the freedoms of blacks and restricted their rights to quality public education, housing, and equal use of public facilities—were still widely used. His play *Fences* foreshadows the turbulent sixties, a time when blacks strongly opposed these restrictions. Indeed, Wilson attributes the thrust of his work to that area of rebellion: "I can only do what I do because the sixties existed. I am building off that original conflict."

This timeline outlines the events which shaped the lives of both Wilson's characters and the actual people who lived through the inequality of which Wilson writes.

★ 1936 Jesse Owens is the top athlete at the Berlin Olympics. Hitler leaves the stand when Negro athletes come forward to receive their medals.

★ 1941 President Roosevelt calls a conference of black leaders and issues an executive order banning discrimination in industries holding government contracts.

★ 1942 The United States Army, Navy, and Marines admit blacks for unsegregated training.

★ 1945 August Wilson is born.

★ 1946 The Supreme Court strikes down a law in Virginia that requires blacks on an interstate bus to move to the rear to make way for a white passenger.

★ 1947 Jackie Robinson breaks the color barrier in big league baseball, becoming the first black in the major leagues.

★ 1949 The Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1866, meets in Montgomery, Alabama, to form a national association of six Southern states. Intimidation activities and violence escalate through the fifties and sixties, and blacks mobilize to gain the rights granted them through constitutional amendment but never realized.

★ 1954 The landmark Supreme Court case *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education* brings an end to legal education discrimination. Chief Justice Earl Warren declares in his opinion that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The decision compels schools to accept both black and white students, although in many southern states the ruling is ignored.

★ 1955 Rosa Parks, a department store seamstress, refuses to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She is arrested and her action launches the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a 381-day event which results in the Supreme Court order to desegregate the bus system in Montgomery. The young Martin Luther King, Jr., comes forward as a leader in this event.

★ 1955 Marian Anderson becomes the first black singer at the Metropolitan Opera.

★ 1957 In a major challenge to *Brown vs. the Topeka Board of Education*, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refuses to allow the integration of the Little Rock schools. It takes a presidential proclamation, the 101st Airborne Division, and the state militia to ensure the safe entrance of nine black teenagers to the high school.

★ 1960 The era of sit-ins and "Freedom Rides" all over the South: black youths begin to conduct protests against segregated restaurants, parks, swimming pools, etc. They also assert their rights on public transportation, often eliciting violence.

★ 1961 August Wilson drops out of Gladstone High School at the age of fifteen.

★ 1962 President Kennedy sends federal troops to the University of Mississippi to ensure the safety of James Meredith, the first black student to enroll in the famous southern school. The riot which ensues leaves two dead, 200 arrested, and dozens of weapons confiscated.

★ 1963 Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers is assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi, where he had been leading a campaign for fair employment and integration against a stubborn city government. His killer would not be convicted until 1993.

★ 1963 Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers his famous "I Have A Dream" address at the Lincoln Memorial.

★ 1964 Congress passes the Civil Rights Act, aimed at ending discrimination against blacks and other minority groups. The law provides measures to ensure equal rights for all Americans to vote, to work, and to use public accommodations, public education, and programs receiving federal funding.

★ 1968 August Wilson co-founds Black Horizon's Theatre Group.

★ 1983 *Fences* initially presented at O'Neill Theatre Company.

★ 1985 *Fences* opens at Yale Repertory Theatre.

★ 1987 August Wilson receives Pulitzer Prize in Drama for *Fences*. ★

DRAMATURG: JANET ALLEN
DESIGNER: RICHARD J. ROBERTS
CONTRIBUTOR: MELISSA SCHNEIDER