

# ***Fences***

**By August Wilson**

**Directed by Lou Bellamy**

**A Penumbra Theatre Company Production**

**August 21 through October 19, 2008**

**Previews August 19 & 20**

Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide

## Educational Tools

### *Penumbra Theatre Study Guide*

Greetings! Thank you for visiting Penumbra Theatre Company's **Study Guide Library**. We are so pleased that you seek to extend and engage your understanding of the drama we produce and the thematic issues it brings to the fore.

**Penumbra Theatre Company** occupies a very unique place within American society, and by extension of that, the world. Penumbra was borne out of the Black Arts Movement, a time charged by civic protest and community action. An artist making art by, for and about the black community was charged with merging aesthetic (artistic) principles with ethical (moral) ones. Subsequently, in this historical and political context, art had an agenda to strive toward social change. African American artists were part of, and greatly influenced, the social currents that carried people from their homes, schools and places of worship to the streets.

Bonding artistic interpretation with civic responsibility engenders an important kind of creative dissonance, a harmony of balance. It creates something neither art nor civic action could do alone. This is mission driven art, informed by a black ethos and aesthetic, which can adequately illuminate our experience. **Ensemble Theatre** in that context is the creation of a community of people committed to the telling of a story that acknowledges the experience of everyone involved. This kind of art demands that each audience member recognize his or her place in relation to the art. When that happens, we begin to think about ourselves as interactive forces in a greater social context. Our own agency becomes clearer to us; our choices and reactions start to make sense within a broader, more nuanced environment. We begin to see that others have lived with similar issues, and that their perspectives have great potential to enrich our experience and help us problem-solve. This kind of art creates and sustains community. It encourages coalition.

The function of an **Education and Outreach Program** inside an institution such as Penumbra Theatre Company is to use informed discussion and interdisciplinary tools to unpack the issues stimulated by the drama. Just as an actor must learn lines and blocking before interpreting a character, we offer our audiences the practical tools so that they may respond to the art both critically and creatively. It is our job to push conversation, critical analysis, and commentary beyond emotion toward solution.

The **Study Guides** are meant to stimulate discussion, not to present a definitive voice or the "right answer." Theatre is *fluid*, active, interactive and reactive; we must engage it intellectually that way too.

We hope to create space for the themes inspired by the drama to take root and blossom. Penumbra invites audiences to participate in the art and social action, by using our Education and Outreach tools to locate their contribution, their voice, within the larger human story we tell over and over again. We love. We fail. We begin anew. Over and over, told by countless tongues, embodied by some of the finest actors and carried in the hearts of some of the most committed audience members; we speak our human lessons through the prism of the African American experience.

## THE ARTISTIC PROCESS

An Exploratory Essay by Sarah Bellamy

### The Social Symbolic: Individuals in Society

Art is a complicated process that we rarely fully engage. It stimulates emotional, intellectual, even physical responses in audiences. Art is so powerful because it is one example of a deep and necessary connection between an individual and the collective world. To better understand the process of art, it helps to consider this connection and how it works.

The connection between an individual and society is made through complex systems of meaning and metaphor; groups of symbols created by humans that represent how we feel, think, see and understand the world in which we live. These systems represent the tie that binds us all to one another in relationships that constitute identity, and help us comprehend our human experience. Art is one such system and there are others too.

Individuals can only access these systems through the collective, social world. In order for a human child, for example, to learn to use language (really just a system of symbols, meaning and metaphor), that child must come into contact with other human beings who already grasp and make use of the faculty of language. Once the child is inducted into this social system, the symbols, meaning and metaphor common to all members of the community will eventually dominate the life-experience of that child and his or her ability to reflect upon or process that experience. In fact, these systems are so powerful, that the child will also only come to understand him or herself in relation to other community members, and only through the system of meaning and metaphor common to that group. This process is called socialization. A community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism forms its culture. Socialization does two things: it sustains culture and forms an individual's identity.

### Social Commentary and the Nature of Art

Art works by tapping into a community's system of meaning, metaphor and symbolism to represent the experience, knowledge or reality specific to that culture. Art is ultimately the expression of an idea, emotion or experience through the creation of a symbolic structure. The artistic product does not have to have *physical structure* to be considered art. Music, story-telling, and dance are all artistic modes that are active and not permanent. Instead art is defined by its ability to recreate human experience through the point of view of the artist and affect a response within an audience. This might seem fairly simple, or even obvious. A deeper examination, however, will illuminate the special quality of art and explain why it is so important to a healthy society.

Human beings have the unique ability to critically observe ourselves. We can, in other words, reflect upon our actions, emotions and experiences. The fact that the word "reflect" can mean "to think" and "to mirror, or reverse an original image back to its source," is quite telling about the nature of art. In the most basic terms, an artist creates a piece of art as a reflection of culture. Culture is made up of individuals, their experiences and the integration of all of these things to become more than the sum of its individual parts.

Artists use many different structures, or “mediums,” to communicate meaning. The artist’s effort to communicate his or her intent is both informed by, and limited to, his or her cultural perspective; no individual exists completely outside of some cultural context. Within that cultural context, the artist embodies different symbols that have meaning within the culture. His or her navigation of the cultural landscape will be informed by these symbols and will also inform the art too. This is what we mean when we talk about an artist’s “voice.” Even though the artistic product may not have sound (like a painting or a piece of sculpture) it was created by a particular person with a particular experience in a particular social context. The artistic product reflects those particularities (the artist’s perspective or point of view) and the meaning it conveys is determined by them.

Moreover, any form of communication (like language or art) requires the use of the symbolic tools of the culture. This means that in order to reflect the culture through artistic representation, the artist has to be able to stand both outside and inside a culture simultaneously (but never be totally in either place). Only from that vantage point can the artist use the symbolic tools of a culture to communicate what he or she observes about the culture itself. This is what is known as “artistic commentary.” It conveys the artist’s intent, or impetus for creating something.

### **The Role of the Audience and the Alienation of the Artist**

The process does not end with the creation of an artistic product. Art needs an audience other than the artist who created it. In solitude, the artist may marvel at his or her creation—might even be enlightened or surprised by it—but the artist will remain unfulfilled without the participation of an audience. The artist was moved to respond to cultural stimuli, the response now requires an audience to receive it, absorb it and refract it back to the artist. This is the contribution of the artistic product to the cultural landscape that inspired it. This way the artist can observe the change engendered by his or her commentary. To comment on something is to change it.

If the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret and then comment in order to change, the nature of the audience is also to observe and interpret. Because each human being has been exposed to an infinite number of symbols in widely divergent patterns and trajectories, and at different points in our lives, each spectator will “read” (or make sense of, interpret the symbols) the artistic product differently. An entire audience might have similar emotional or intellectual responses to a piece of art, but each spectator will have a slightly different experience than his or her neighbor. When the members of an audience have an opportunity to discuss their experience, the entire group is enlightened or engaged, bound by the same artistic element. This is how art creates community. A kind of spontaneous culture is fashioned by virtue of a shared experience. The culture is singular to itself because of the unique qualities of each audience member and any variance within the art.

The audience has one last critical role to play in the artistic process, and it is both enlightening and violent. The audience is invited to observe a translation of a common experience through the perspective of an artist. The audience is then momentarily able to achieve a similar distance from the culture as the artist did before creating the artistic product, but this time the audience starts at the end and works in retrospect back to the state of things to which the artist originally responded. They are afforded the benefit of the impetus for the art and the art itself simultaneously. This event illustrates the extent of, or limit to, the intent of the artist.

In order to comprehend the art, in order to feel it, the spectator must contextualize it within his or her own unique experience. Of course this experience is largely determined by the spectator's cultural context. Even as the spectator experiences the art he or she changes it, manipulates it so that it will fit within the frame of reference particular to him or her. Art encourages all who use the system of symbolism, meaning and metaphor to consider it differently. This is where the integrity of the artist's original intent starts to break down, and it is the moment in which the artist **loses** the ability to control his or her artistic product. The artist can no longer speak for the art; the art now speaks for itself and for the artist. By virtue of its nature, an audience changes the artistic product fundamentally from the scope of what is intended by the artist to the full breadth of the potential audience experience. To claim the art is to fulfill it, it is also to sever it forever from its original intent—it is no longer defined by a striving to effect change through artistic translation and commentary, it is the reception of the comment and the realization of change. The artistic product has traveled a very great distance between the artist and the audience. It is now absorbed back into the cultural system of metaphor and symbolism and becomes another tool for communicating meaning. The artist is impotent to reclaim or control the artistic product. So to reiterate, the nature of the artist is to observe, interpret, comment and in so doing effect change. The nature of the audience is to observe, interpret, and claim.

### **Perpetual Motion: The Circle of Art and Culture**

The manipulation, possible misunderstanding and absorption of the artistic product by the culture, is both a fulfillment and a violation of the artist. The only way for the artist to regain agency or engage his or her artistic product from this point on is to produce more art in response to the culture. This is how art is perpetual and how culture and art continually constitute one another. It stimulates growth in both arenas and so keeps a society from stagnating.

### **Summary**

To review, an artist responds to cultural stimuli through the manipulation of symbols that the culture uses to communicate meaning. The artistic product is a blend of the system of meaning specific to a culture and the artist's interpretation of that system. The art produced is the artist's commentary. The audience functions as an agent of translation as it claims the artistic product for itself and alters it in order to access it. The culture absorbs the art and the artist no longer can change or access his or her artistic product now that it has entered the social realm of the symbolic. The artist can only create more art, using the tools of the cultural symbolic, a system that has already been altered by its absorption of the original artistic product. Thus art and culture are constitutive of one another.

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## A BRIEF OVERVIEW ON THE HISTORY OF AFRICAN AMERICAN THEATRE

Aspects of the dramatic performing arts can be found in cultures around the world. Globally speaking, American Theater is a relatively new tradition. As theater has evolved from the **African roots** of Greek tragedy to Shakespearean epics, American stages have produced a wide range of plays, largely influenced by the diverse peoples inhabiting this nation. In its early years, American Theater reflected the lives of its proponents, namely white, property-owning, Christian men. Ironically, even as America established itself as a sovereign nation, the drama of the day came largely from Europe, which boasted a unique canon of work. Still, as early as 1821 black American artists were creating, staging and performing for mixed audiences, showcasing both existing and original work.

One of the first theater companies to approach the dramatic performing arts from an African American perspective was **The African Grove Theater** in New York City. It was founded by **William Henry Brown** and **James Hewlett**, both who had traveled by ship throughout the Caribbean, where story-telling, performance, dance and music were essential to the culture and survival of the slaves working on sugar cane and tobacco plantations, salt flats and mines. The company performed tragedies and comedies from Shakespeare to American playwrights. Eventually, the need for work that came from within the African American experience proved itself. Two years after it opened, the first play written and produced by an African American was presented at the African Grove in 1823. The play, *The Drama of King Shotaway*, by Brown, played to mixed (though predominately black) audiences that year. However, many whites were adamantly opposed to the existence of such a theater and frequent police raids, harassment and threats forced Brown and Hewlett to relocate the theater several times throughout the lower East side of Manhattan. Eventually, the white opposition won out over the tenacity of the black actors, directors and producers of The African Grove Theater Company and it closed its doors permanently.<sup>1</sup>

As Americans established a canon of their own, dominant political and social trends were addressed by the work. One of the nation's most successful and fraught enterprises was

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<sup>1</sup> For more information see Bernard L. Peterson Jr.'s "Introduction: The Origin and Development of the Black American Playwright from the Antebellum Period to World War II," *Early Black American Playwrights and Dramatic Writers: A Biographical Directory and Catalog of Plays, Films, and Broadcasting Scripts*. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990) 1-21.

racialized slavery in the American South. Depicted on white stages, black characters often fit into stereotypical characters which would haunt American stages for decades to come. Some of the most prevalent of those were **the Sambo, the Uncle, the Mammy and the Jezebel**. These racist depictions would be reflected over and over again in the theater, usually performed by white actors in blackface. African-American artists struggled against these stereotypical images as soon as they entered the public sphere. In 1857, **William Wells Brown**, (no relation to William Henry Brown) juxtaposed a stereotypical black male character named Cato with an exemplary black male character named Glen in his play *The Escape; or a Leap for Freedom*. This play highlighted the difference between an image created by black people for black audiences and an image created by white people for white audiences. It was an important statement.

Still the popularity of comical representations of black Americans continued. **Minstrelsy** was very popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. This performance tradition was created as whites made light of and fantasized about slave life and plantation culture in the antebellum South. White entertainers in **blackface** would do comedic impressions of, or parody, the stories, songs and dance, jokes and music of blacks for white audiences. Minstrelsy was a very lucrative and beloved form of theater for white audiences for many years. White theatre-goers filled houses to laugh at representations of blacks as happy, contented and dim-witted. The tradition would continue long into the mid-1900s. Responsible for the creation of one familiar American character, **Jim Crow**, this theatre tradition was hardly benign. Its impact had a life that extended far beyond the stage in American social, political and civil rights policy.

For many years, (largely due to the audience expectations created by these white performers) the only work black performers could find was to perform in minstrel shows, *in blackface*. This absurd situation reinforces the notion that the depictions of blackness and black people on white stages was not real. Even black actors had to “perform” white ideas of blackness by darkening their skin, wearing silly costumes and miming the white actors’ racist depictions of black people.

In Hollywood, some of America’s most revered epic films depict the early stereotypes created in the theater and in the 1920s and 30s. Black artists, writers and musicians began responding to the racist depictions and creating their own artistic representations of black life and philosophy. This period of burgeoning talent and new work is known as **The Harlem Renaissance**. In 1923, the first serious play written by a black playwright produced on Broadway. It was called *The Chip Woman’s Fortune* by **Willis Richardson**.<sup>2</sup> Still, the prevalent trend was for white artists and producers to pull from black narrative, song and dance and

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 165.

parody it for audiences. **Langston Hughes** and **Jean Toomer** were particularly concerned with white representations of blackness in the theater. Read below, Langston Hughes' famous poem "Notes on Commercial Theater":

You've taken my blues and gone --  
You sing 'em on Broadway  
And you sing 'em in Hollywood Bowl,  
And you mixed 'em up with symphonies  
And you fixed 'em  
So they don't sound like me.  
Yep, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spirituals and gone  
You put me in Macbeth and Carmen Jones  
All kinds of Swing Mikados  
And in everything but what's about me --  
But someday somebody'll  
Stand up and talk about me --  
Black and beautiful --  
And sing about me,  
And put on plays about me!  
I reckon it'll be  
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.<sup>3</sup>

This poem echoes one of the founding tenets of another critical moment in black theater history, the **Black Arts Movement** of the 1960s. It was during this period that some of the most celebrated black writers responded vociferously to the racism American citizens were struggling against in the Civil Rights Movement. Self-representation became a major focus of the movement—art was created by, for, and about black people. Artists such as **LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka**, **Ed Bullins**, **Nikki Giovanni**, **Harold Cruse**, **Ray Durem**, **Adrienne Kennedy**, **Larry Neal** and **Sonia Sanchez** all produced seminal work during this period of time. In 1959 **Lorraine Hansberry's** famous play *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on Broadway in New York City. It was the first time a play written by a black playwright, directed by a black director (**Lloyd Richards**) and written about black people was presented at this level. The next twenty years saw an eruption of African American theater companies springing up around the country, one of which was **Penumbra Theatre Company** in St. Paul, Minnesota.

Founded in 1976 by Artistic Director **Lou Bellamy**, Penumbra addressed issues of racial tension and misrepresentation between what were visibly separate black and white Americas. Over the last 30 years, Penumbra has provided a consistently clear message that the

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<sup>3</sup> Hughes, Langston. *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. (New York: Vintage, 1995) 215.

African American experience is rich, dynamic and critical to the American theater canon. While visiting the Twin Cities, playwright **August Wilson** said of Penumbra:

It was with the indomitable spirit associated with pioneers and visionaries that Lou Bellamy took a handful of actors over [sic] twenty years ago and challenged them not only to believe in themselves but to have a belief larger than anyone's disbelief. When I walked through the doors of Penumbra Theatre [sic], I did not know that I would find life-long friends and supporters that would encourage and enable my art. I did not know I would have my first professional production, a musical satire called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*. I did not know then what Penumbra Theatre would come to mean to me and that there would come a time when Penumbra would produce more of my plays than any other theatre in the world. And that their production of *The Piano Lesson* would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style an eloquence that would inspire my future work. I only knew that I was excited to be in a black theater that had real lights, assigned seats and a set that was not a hodgepodge of found and borrowed props as had been my experience with all the black theater I had known. We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of PTC enlarged that possibility. And its corresponding success provokes the community to a higher expectation of itself. I became a playwright because I saw where my chosen profession was being sanctioned by a group of black men and women who were willing to invest their lives and their talent in assuming a responsibility for our presence in the world and the conduct of our industry as black Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Through artistically excellent theater, Penumbra has sought to plumb the depths of the human experience by presenting culturally specific and historically accurate depictions of African Americans. Sadly, many of the black theater companies founded during the BAM have closed over the years, largely due to lack of funding, managerial problems and poor attendance. Penumbra's survival is a testament to all the people who believe in its power for social change. Our artists, administration, audiences and community have consistently buoyed us up and kept this important institution afloat on the occasionally stormy seas of non-profit arts administration. Today, because of our growth and the changing world, Penumbra is widely regarded as a pioneer of cross-cultural dialogue. Our template of finding the universal through the specificity of human experience has become a model for teaching, arts application and criticism. We are nationally and internationally recognized as a preeminent African American theater company.

Lou Bellamy explains that black people not only "have to be at the table" to engage in cross-cultural conversations, but host such debates as well. In an America that increasingly more often accepts oversimplified answers, we seek out nuance and enjoy disturbing the veneer. At Penumbra, we provide the table at which artists and audiences alike may sit down and rigorously engage one another with complicated questions. We are proud to have these artists in our midst and excited to produce work that circumvents a hackneyed black / white binary.

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<sup>4</sup> August Wilson, excerpted from a speech given at Penumbra Theatre Company, 1997.

## INTRODUCTION

Penumbra Theatre Company is honored to dedicate the next four years exploring the 20<sup>th</sup> Century through the eyes of two time Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson. We begin this year with *Fences*.

August Wilson is one of the most celebrated playwrights of the day. His accomplishments include a cycle of ten plays each devoted to a different decade in black American history through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He was awarded two Pulitzer Prizes, witnessed countless Broadway stagings of his work, procured film deals and the respect and admiration of artists, theorists and theatre-goers alike. His work offers students a special opportunity to deeply research the cultural nuance, specificity and experience of black Americans struggling for autonomy and a place within a country rent by its history of racialized slavery.

Because this playwright set himself about depicting African American life decade by decade through the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, August Wilson's cycle presents a unique opportunity to explore the social and historical context for the drama. Each play becomes a window into American history, told by the disenfranchised, those that were all too often written out of the history books. Contemporary audiences witness the reanimation of our uniquely American history, situated always against the legacy of slavery that built this great nation. Wilson portrays the dogged determination, the abiding hope, and the deafening disappointment experienced by black Americans who found the rules changing to exclude them. The message came home clearly each time: the wealth, prosperity and justice of this great nation is available to the racial and economic elite. Poor black people would always have a hard row to hoe, but it was made doubly hard by those who were determined to maintain the old regime of subservience and domination.

Wilson's plays share black American pain and frustration but also ingenuity and efforts toward success in spite of seemingly insurmountable odds. What emerges is a richly nuanced visit with the American historical archive, a place to sit with old ghosts as well as old friends and both honor and reconcile the past.

The study guides will offer deep historical contextualization of each decade, while knitting together the larger American story of the birth of our nation and its rise to global dominance.

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## THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY CYCLE – AUGUST WILSON, AN AMERICAN LEGEND

August Wilson dedicated his life to presenting authentic representations of black American life and culture for the stage. Over the next five years, Penumbra will produce the entire cycle, giving audiences an opportunity to witness his work as interpreted by the artists who brought these plays to life in a way that he had not experienced before.

Wilson said that Penumbra's production of *The Piano Lesson* (1993) "would become not only my favorite staging but a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work." That work became a decade-by-decade depiction of the dreams, disappointments and determination of African Americans over the past hundred years. What he saw at Penumbra emboldened him to broaden his own expectations:

"We are what we imagine ourselves to be and we can only imagine what we know to be possible. The founding of Penumbra Theatre enlarged that possibility."

Wilson's profound project, the 20th Century Cycle, is a candid album depicting American history at its most tender, tough and triumphant.

1900s	Gem of the Ocean
1910s	Joe Turner's Come and Gone
1920s	Ma Rainey's Black Bottom
1930s	The Piano Lesson*
1940s	Seven Guitars
1950s	Fences*
1960s	Two Trains Running
1970s	Jitney
1980s	King Hedley II
1990s	Radio Golf

\* denotes a Pulitzer Prize



**August Wilson** (April 27, 1945—October 2, 2005)

August Wilson grew up in the Hill district of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His childhood experiences in this predominately African American community informed his dramatic writing. Wilson's singular achievement and literary legacy is a cycle of ten plays dubbed "The Pittsburgh Cycle." Each is set in a different decade, depicting the comedy and tragedy of the African-American experience in the 20th century, "a device," Charles Whittaker (*Ebony*) wrote, "that has enabled Wilson to

explore, often in very subtle ways, the myriad and mutating forms of the legacy of slavery." Wilson's project became more than ten poetic plays. The cycle is a metronome of American culture, reflecting the buried heartbeat of an experience parallel to the mainstream. These are snapshots of life in a country that has both celebrated and scorned black people. The entire album is the story of our nation. "This cycle," notes *the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette's* theater critic Christopher Rawson, "is unprecedented in American theater for its concept, size, and cohesion."

Called "one of the most important voices in the American theater today" by Mervyn Rothstein in the *New York Times*, August Wilson's authentic sounding characters have brought a new understanding of the black experience to audiences around the country. For example, *Fences*, tells the story of a black baseball player who broke national records by leaps and bounds but was prevented from playing outside of the Negro Leagues. *Fences* opened on Broadway in the spring of 1987 to enormous critical acclaim and earned Wilson his first Pulitzer Prize. Wilson's work gives audiences the opportunity to go back and reexamine American history through characters that are epic, poignant and defiantly struggling against the institutionalized legacy of racism in this country.

### **Gem of the Ocean**

Regional Premier, Spring 2008

*Gem of the Ocean* begins the century-long cycle chronicling black American life. Bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, the first generation of black Americans recently freed from slavery are unprepared for the backlash against their newly acquired freedom by whites. Many venture north and find themselves at Aunt Ester's door, seeking solace, advice, or a place to heal. Aunt Ester makes room in the world for those cast aside. She examines and treats wounded souls. Her wisdom is ancient, timeless, connected to the source from which black Americans had been taken. *Gem of the Ocean* introduces audiences to Aunt Ester, keeper of the flame.

### **Joe Turner's Come and Gone**

Produced by Penumbra in 1991 and 2002

Set in a Pittsburgh boarding house in 1911, this play was inspired by **Romare Bearden's** painting **Mill Hand's Lunch Bucket**. Harold Loomis was modeled after the brooding, ominous figure in the center. Recently freed from bondage, Loomis has traveled north to Pittsburgh with his young daughter in tow. They are looking for his wife, estranged from him when Joe Turner arrested him for gambling. For seven years Joe Turner held Loomis hostage on his illegal plantation. The experience recreated the nightmare of slavery and Loomis lost his "song." *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is the haunting tale of a community of transient people who band together to heal one man and ultimately heal one another.

### **Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**

Produced by Penumbra in 1987 and 1996

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The only play in the cycle that takes place outside of Pittsburgh, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* delves into the sultry and dangerous 1920s blues scene in Chicago. Ma Rainey was a renowned vocalist, famous for her deep and forthright interpretation of the blues. Though undeniably talented, she was still subject to the racism pervasive in the American music industry. Held in check by white producers, she continually defied their limits to her talent, potential and authority. When Levee, a man deeply scarred from the harassment and dismissal of his worth by white society, strays from the group to reach for a solo career the magic of the band is broken. Levee's once golden trumpeting emerges from the pain and rage of his own personal anguish in a tragic, misguided cry for help.

### **The Piano Lesson\***

Produced by Penumbra in 1993 and 2008

The piano that sits in the salon of the Charles home is very valuable. For Bernice, it holds the spirit of her grandparents, sold away in exchange for it during slavery. For her brother, Boy Willie, it holds the key to his freedom from the burden of sharecropping for a meager wage. The struggle between the siblings over the symbolic and literal value of the piano escalates into a conflict that threatens to tear the family apart. Penumbra's production of *The Piano Lesson* represents Wilson's work at its definitive best, the playwright himself called it his "favorite staging [and] a model of style and eloquence that would inspire my future work." A Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *The Piano Lesson* is the story of a family haunted by the living legacy of American slavery.

### **Seven Guitars**

Produced by Penumbra in 1993 and 2003

The story of Floyd "Schoolboy" Barton, a blues guitarist on the cusp of stardom, unravels in flashback after his untimely death. We meet Floyd as he's talking his way back into Vera's heart, a woman who has given him everything until finally, she has given up. But Floyd won't be discouraged. His eye is focused on a clear light, a light that promises to bathe him in real success if he can carry his talent, his drive and his love toward a record deal waiting for him in Chicago. Floyd's charm and enthusiasm stirs up the hope in everyone. As Floyd's success beckons, it is with reservation that one by one they begin to believe in the possibility of dreams coming true. Finally, in a full chorus, while mourning the loss of their friend, each of these seven souls has a song to sing, its hope tinged with the kind of sadness only a blues guitar can cry.

### **Fences\***

Produced by Penumbra in 1990 and 1997

Baseball makes sense to Troy Maxson; a man gets three strikes and he's out. In this most American of pastimes, Troy has found an opportunity to play by the rules and win. When his rapid rise through the Negro leagues hits the ceiling of racial prejudice, however, Troy is forced to let go of his dream of major league success. Set in 1957, *Fences* is the story of a baseball player whose prime came before Jackie Robinson broke

the color barrier. A Pulitzer Prize-winning play, *Fences* is the heartbreaking story of a man who by all rights should have been an American legend.

### **Two Trains Running**

Produced by Penumbra in 1994 and 2003

*Two Trains Running* is set in a modest diner frequented by the same group of folks. Memphis is hardly making a large profit with his small café, in fact, he's probably barely scraping by. But the place has sustained a small community of folks in Pittsburgh's Hill District, and it is his. It is 1969. The country is rapidly changing. The Civil Rights Movement has folks floored, reeling from its fervor and insistence. The Hill District, too, is seeing change as developers buy historic buildings with plans to tear them down to make way for new developments. They have come for Memphis' diner. He has vowed to make the city give him a fair price for his place and is willing to go through fire to get it. No one knows quite what Memphis has been through, but all soon realize that this is his most important stand. *Two Trains Running* illuminates the simple poetry in justice, that in trade one should be given what one is due. Too many times the people of the diner have been duped or shortchanged, and in the name of one man whose simple logic of fair trade has driven him literally to madness, this group of disenfranchised, depressed few finds the integrity on which they make a final stand.

### **Jitney**

Produced by Penumbra in 1985 and 2000

Revisiting themes of urban renewal, *Jitney* is set in 1970 in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. Eager to gentrify the neighborhood, the city threatens to level a makeshift taxi dispatch office where neighbors gather that has served the community for years. As he tries to stave off the city, the owner of the cab company faces his own inner struggle. After a twenty-year stint in prison for murder, his son is returning home. Regarded as a lyrically symphonic play, *Jitney* tells the story of a generation recognizing its mortality while the next must face its responsibility.

### **King Hedley II**

Produced by Penumbra in 2003

It was Hedley that young Ruby chose in *Seven Guitars* and she named their child King. We meet King as a grown man, fighting to survive a life that seems never to look bright. King carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. At times, he even seems strapped with a curse. Yet King imagines that he is crowned instead, adorned with a halo whose meaning he does not yet know. *King Hedley II* is a riveting play about the past revisiting a man struggling to free himself from the grip of his family's legacy while desperate to hold on to his loved ones.

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**Radio Golf**

Penumbra Theatre Company has not yet produced this play.

*Radio Golf* is the story of a man whose path through life has been decreed by his father. Following in the footsteps of a well-respected but feared man, Harmond Wilks struggles to evade his shadow. He does what is expected of him in order to help his community, but it is ultimately his own journey and rejection of the grandeur which awaits him that brings him back to the people of Pittsburgh's Hill District.

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## CHARACTERS IN THE PLAY

- Troy Maxson:** Early 50's. Legendary Negro League baseball player, now working as a garbage collector. Troy is a story-teller. He is at once jovial and loving and brash and overbearing. A complicated man embittered by the racism he has experienced throughout his life.
- Rose Maxson:** Mid 40s. Troy's wife. A strong, supportive woman who is fiercely protective of her husband and son. A loving presence that counterbalances Troy's ferocity for life, Rose mothers almost everyone around her. She is quiet and laughs easily. A gentle spirit.
- Jim Bono:** Early 50's. Troy's very good friend. The men met while in prison and Bono, as he is known, has stayed with Troy through his legendary days in baseball and today works beside him as a garbage man. Like brothers, the two men love each other deeply.
- Cory:** Late teens. Troy and Rose's son. Cory is a natural athlete like his father, eager to prove his salt to the legendary Troy Maxson. He has been playing football, hoping to catch the eyes of college recruiters, offering him the educational opportunities his illiterate father never had.
- Lyons:** Mid 30's. Troy's eldest son from a previous relationship. Lyons is a musician who cannot seem to keep a job. He is full of laughter and uses his charming personality to quell his father's quick anger. A grown man, he lives with his girlfriend nearby.
- Gabriel:** Early 40s. Troy's brother. After being severely injured with a head trauma in World War II, Gabriel is left with a childlike innocence and a deep sense of concern for his older brother. He believes with every fiber in his being that he is the archangel Gabriel.
- Raynell:** Nine years old. Troy's daughter and youngest child from another relationship. After Alberta, the woman with whom Troy has had an affair dies in childbirth, Rose takes the baby in, and despite her husband's infidelity, raises her as her own.

## **SYNOPSIS: A SCENE BY SCENE BREAKDOWN**

### **SCENIC BREAKDOWN**

#### Act I

- Scene 1: Friday night
- Scene 2: The next morning
- Scene 3: A few hours later
- Scene 4: Friday, two weeks later

#### Act II

- Scene 1: The following morning
- Scene 2: Six months later, early afternoon
- Scene 3: Late evening, three days later
- Scene 4: Two months later
- Scene 5: Eight years later, morning

### **SYNOPSIS**

#### **SETTING (as written by the playwright)**

The Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 1957

The setting is the yard which fronts the only entrance to the Maxson household, an ancient two-story brick house set back off a small alley in a big-city neighborhood. The entrance to the house is gained by two or three steps leading to a wooden porch badly in need of paint.

A relatively recent addition to the house and running its full width, the porch lacks congruence. It is a sturdy porch with a flat roof. One or two chairs of dubious value sit at one end where the kitchen window opens onto the porch. An old fashioned icebox stands silent guard and opposite end.

The yard is a small dirt yard, partially fenced (except during the last scene), with a wooden sawhorse, a pile of lumber, and other fence-building equipment off to the side. Opposite is a tree from which hangs a ball made of rags. A baseball bat leans against the tree. Two oil drums serve as garbage receptacles and sit near the house at right to complete the setting.

## An American Legend

an Essay by Sarah Bellamy

“My greatest thrill? Well, everyone has his own favorite day. But I’ve got to say my biggest thrill was when they opened the door to the Negro. When they said we couldn’t play and we proved that we could, that was the biggest thrill to me. There were more guys before me who didn’t have a chance, and I wanted us to prove it to ‘em all, black and white alike.”

-- James “Cool Papa” Bell, St. Louis 1970

### INTRODUCTION

A Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *Fences* is arguably August Wilson’s masterpiece. Set in 1957, it is the story of Troy Maxson, a legendary baseball player whose dreams and legacy died with the **Negro Leagues**.

The Negro Leagues tell the story of American segregation through the lens of the country’s most cherished pastime: baseball. It was an era in which black Americans daily faced the injustice and humiliation of sanctioned racism. Whether it meant that black people had to use separate washrooms or watering fountains, or as many of the black baseball teams that traveled about the country did, sleep in fields when no hotels would allow them room and board, white America ensured that black people knew they were second-class citizens with limited rights and little respect. Still, in this era of hardship, black Americans banded together to create worlds in which they would have to interact with whites as little as possible. Black businesses, papers and schools sprung up to serve black patrons with dignity and fairness, black doctors and tradesmen kept both the people and their blossoming economy healthy and prevented from playing alongside whites, black folks created their own sports teams too.

For nearly seventy years after the **abolition of slavery**, African Americans lived as second-class citizens in the nation built largely by their labor. By the 1950s, this pressure had brought resentment and anger close to the surface. Already the last bastions of **segregation** were beginning to give way. It would be only a few short years before one of the most significant sociopolitical shifts in the world, the **American Civil Rights Movement**, launched into full swing.

**August Wilson**, who set all but one of his plays in Pittsburgh, contextualized the fifties within the mighty push of the **Industrial Revolution**. In the preface, Wilson exposes the roots of the American dream—and who had access to it—setting the stage for his epic tale of baseball legend Troy Maxson:

Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. They swelled in its belly until it burst into a thousand furnaces and sewing machines, a thousand butcher shops and bakers' ovens, a thousand churches and banks and hospitals and funeral parlors. The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation. They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled and settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tarpaper. They collected rags and wood. They sold the use of their muscles and their bodies. They cleaned houses and washed clothes, they shined shoes, and in quiet desperation and vengeful pride, they stole, and lived in pursuit of their own dream: that they could breathe free, finally, and stand to meet life with the force of dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon.

By 1957, the hard-won victories of European immigrants had solidified the industrial might of America. War had been confronted and won with new energies that used loyalty and patriotism as its fuel. Life was rich, full, and flourishing. The Milwaukee Braves won the World Series, and the hot winds of change that would make the sixties a turbulent, racing, dangerous, and provocative decade had not yet begun to blow full.

1957 is remembered for many reasons. Some might recall the opening of two movies starring the dark-haired, blue-eyed crooner Elvis Presley—"Loving You" and "Jailhouse Rock." Wham-O produced the first Frisbee in 1957. Dr. Seuss published the much-loved children's story *The Cat in the Hat*. Jimmy Hoffa was arrested on charges of

bribery by the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Beloved actor Humphrey Bogart died that year. But perhaps what shook the nation most deeply was the day nine black children went to school.

Three years prior, the U.S. Supreme Court declared state-sponsored segregation unconstitutional in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education*. Ninety-six American congressman would support a document called the **Southern Manifesto** that ridiculed the court for “a clear abuse of judicial power,” when it delivered a ruling that public schools could no longer practice or enforce segregation. The backlash by whites in **Little Rock, Arkansas** in response to the admittance of nine black schoolchildren to the local public high school threw the country into racial crisis. These children, selected by the NAACP based on the merit of their outstanding achievements in school, bore the brunt of white America’s resentment at mandatory integration. Orville Faubus, Arkansas’ governor, called the National Guard to Little Rock in an attempt to prevent the students from enrolling. In the midst of massive protest, the children did enter the school after President Eisenhower sent federal troops to escort them. What these children endured as the harbingers of integration is unimaginable. At just sixteen and seventeen years old they were called upon to serve a higher duty, to make room for African American people across the country to have equal access to the education that white Americans enjoyed.

At the same time in Washington, U.S. Senator Strom Thurmond raved for twenty-four hours and eighteen minutes in rejoinder to a civil rights bill that would lay the groundwork for African American voting rights. This tirade is known to this day as the nation’s longest filibuster of a bill. Two years prior, **Rosa Parks** had been arrested for refusing to comply with the segregationist laws that required her to give up her seat to

a white man. Her stance had sparked the **Montgomery Bus Boycott**. The boycott lasted for 385 days. During that time, one of its prominent leaders **Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.** was arrested and his house firebombed.<sup>1</sup> The district court finally ruled to end racial segregation on all **Montgomery** public buses.<sup>2</sup> The seven-decade struggle to cordon black Americans off into a subordinate existence was weakening. In the middle of the century, the nation was on the verge of a giant growth-spurt.

### **JIM CROW AND THE LIMITS TO AMERICAN FREEDOM**

In practice, segregation law in the United States was known as **Jim Crow**. Surviving Jim Crow meant more than enduring the daily assaults on human dignity imparted through signs directing “colored” to separate and often paltry services than those offered to whites. It also meant that black Americans had no protection and no recourse within the law for racially motivated crimes. Intimidation, terrorism, unfair job practices, rape, beatings, murder, lynching, these crimes were rarely punished when black people were the victims. On the other hand, the mere accusation of a crime committed by a black person was taken very seriously. More frequently than not, such accusations never made it before a real court; white communities were sanctioned by Jim Crow law to act as both judge and jury in these situations. All too often black people were convicted and punished for crimes in which no substantial evidence was demonstrated and due process was nowhere in sight. Jim Crow, which lasted effectively from 1867 to the 1960s, is the story of our American caste system. As historian Ronald Davis writes,

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<sup>1</sup> While Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the protest, the boycott was urged and planned by E.D. Nixon, head of the Montgomery NAACP.

<sup>2</sup> The case was known as *Browder v. Gayle*.

Jim Crow represents “an epic tale of endurance and survival that ranks among the great, tragic feats of heroism in American and world history.”<sup>3</sup>

Even though there are many Americans alive today who remember segregation, it is hard for young people to understand the extent to which Jim Crow was experienced, particularly because of the amnesia with which Americans tend to reflect on the darker elements of our shared history. The “freedom” promised after the abolition of slavery was quite limited:

Blacks avoided looking whites in the eyes; and black males and youths knew not to look, even indirectly, at white women or to touch them accidentally. Blacks were expected to stare at the ground when addressing whites of both sexes. Black customers usually were not served first in stores when white customers were present. They usually were not allowed to try on clothing in white businesses, as it was commonly believed that white customers would not purchase clothes that black customers had tried on. Black shoppers almost always were expected to wait patiently for white clerks to address them before speaking. Adult African Americans were seldom afforded titles of respect by whites, such as the terms "Mister," "Mrs.," or "Miss." They were instead referred to by their first names or by the words "boy," "girl," "auntie," "uncle," and, frequently, "nigger."<sup>4</sup>

Most of these rules, though not written into law in specific terms, were customary and colloquially enforced. Jim Crow laws created two distinctly separate social worlds that were at odds yet dependent upon one another. Essentially, segregation divided America with what was known as “the color line.” Based purely on race, this tacit agreement amongst whites kept black people in a kind of identity limbo. They were Americans yet not fully, denied basic civil rights and the freedoms that white citizens enjoyed. **W.E.B. DuBois** is famous for explaining this experience as a “dual consciousness,” an awareness of oneself as a human being that includes but is not limited to one’s experience as a black person living under siege in America.

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<sup>3</sup> Davis, Ronald. <http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/surviving2.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

Black people understood with pristine clarity the situation with which they were faced and both individually and as a community developed tools and skills for survival.

**Paul Laurence Dunbar** captured a feigned acquiescence in the presence of whites in his 1895 poem entitled “We Wear the Mask”:

We wear the mask that grins and lies,  
It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes--  
This debt we pay to human guile;  
With torn and bleeding hearts we smile,  
And mouth with myriad subtleties.

Why should the world be overwise  
In counting all our tears and sighs?  
Nay, let them only see us while  
We wear the mask.

We smile, but, O great Christ, our cries  
To Thee from tortured souls arise.  
We sing, but oh the clay is vile  
Beneath our feet, and long the mile;  
But let the world dream other wise,  
We wear the mask.<sup>5</sup>

For over sixty years black people found ways to endure Jim Crow. Still, the daily humiliations planted a seed of resentment deep in the hearts of many black Americans. While many presented a smooth veneer of contentment and submission, amongst one another black people were living wholly different lives. The survival history of this period is written largely in folkloric texts, songs and adages that come from the dark era of American segregation.

Whether in song, in letters, in legend or in prayer, African Americans strived to remember their history. One of those great periods of African American history, passed down largely through legendary tales of the remarkable days gone by, is the story of the American Negro Leagues. Indeed many of these stories have been passed down through the generations like the way the legendary baseball player Troy Maxson and his best

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<sup>5</sup> Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar*. Joanne M. Braxton, ed. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993).

friend Jim Bono speak in *Fences*—the story begins with a declaration, a challenge and then out comes an incredible tale.

### LIFE IN THE NEGRO LEAGUES

As historian John Holway writes, “the world of black baseball history was not a mere footnote to baseball history—it was fully *half* of baseball history!”<sup>6</sup> Nor does it start with Jackie Robinson, as many Americans believe. Black Americans were playing baseball, and outperforming white players, long before **Jackie Robinson** broke the color line. In 1872, a black man by the name of Bud Fowler became the first man to play in organized baseball, and twelve years later two brothers from Ohio, Welday and Moses Fleetwood Walker played briefly in the major leagues before the “**gentleman’s agreement**” forced black Americans out of major league baseball for the next six decades.

The history of the American Negro Leagues is still being uncovered. Thanks to a handful of dedicated historians and writers who poured through years of microfilm for statistics and anecdotal stories about the great ballplayers, the rich history is methodically being pieced together. One such contributor is John Holway, who in addition to researching the archives interviewed more than seventy black baseball veterans. Commenting on his research of the American Negro Leagues, Holway writes, “in terms of time, the journey took me through five decades, from players who had begun their careers in 1914 or before, to men who were still playing baseball in the fifties. They ranged in age from forty-five to eighty.”<sup>7</sup> Where he found these men says much about what would have happened to their legacy had he and a few others not mined for it: “I

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<sup>6</sup> Holway, John. *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues*. (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992) p. xvii.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

traveled from the worst, most soul-destroying ghettos, where former players ushered me into tenements swarming with roaches, to beautifully landscaped split-levels in the suburbs.”<sup>8</sup> Holway’s contribution to the Negro League baseball record is vital. What he found was that “blacks were playing probably the most exciting—yes, and very possibly the best—baseball seen in America before 1947.”<sup>9</sup>

Negro League baseball was created out of necessity—white ball clubs would not allow blacks to play so they created their own teams. With names like the Cuban Stars, the Homestead Grays, the Hilldales, the Birmingham Black Barons, the Chicago American Giants, the Kansas City Monarchs, the St. Louis Stars, the Indianapolis ABC’s, and the Dayton Marcos, these teams recruited the best of black ballplayers from across the country. They played where they could, in dirt fields, local parks and high school auditoriums. “In cases where black ball clubs could rent out the major league ball parks, they would pay for play time on the field but weren’t allowed to use the locker rooms so they had to suit up somewhere nearby like the local YMCA.”<sup>10</sup> Fans filled the stands to watch the exciting performances. Still, black baseball was not a particularly lucrative investment. “Most owners didn’t make much money from their teams. Baseball was just a hobby for them, and sometimes a way to make their illegal money look good. To save money, each team would only carry fifteen or sixteen players. The major league teams each carried about twenty-five. Average salary for each player started at roughly \$125 per month back in ’34, and went up to \$500-\$800 during the forties, though there were some who made much more than that, like **Satchel Paige** and **Josh Gibson**. The average major

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., xviii, xix.

<sup>10</sup> Nelson, Kadir. *We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball*. (New York: Jump at the Sun/Hyperion Books for Children, 2008) p. 29.

league player's salary back then was \$7,000 per month."<sup>11</sup> The numbers racket, an illegal community lottery, had made some people quite wealthy, particularly in New York City and Pittsburgh where black people played a penny or a nickel and bet as to the number that would show up in a newspaper. When the number hit, winners collected a portion of the raffle. Folks from all walks of life played the numbers, from bar-crawlers to housewives. In *Fences*, when Rose says, "that 642 hit yesterday" she is talking about the numbers business.<sup>12</sup> Today this business started by African Americans has been legalized and is known as the lottery. In the baseball world, two of black baseball's notable owners were tied to the numbers, **Rube Foster** and **Gus Greenlee**. Frustrated with the fact that white major-leaguers in the area refused to play black teams, Foster decided in 1920 to organize black baseball. Foster is considered the founder of the Negro Leagues.

He called a meeting amongst club owners in Kansas City, and pitched the idea of a Negro National League. The owners "agreed to a set of rules that the league would follow. ...[and] named the league the Negro National League. It had eight teams—the Cuban Stars, the Detroit Stars, the Chicago American Giants, the Chicago Giants, the Kansas City Monarchs, the St. Louis Stars, the Indianapolis ABC's, and the Dayton Marcos."<sup>13</sup> This meeting changed the face of baseball in America. "At last a professional black player could enjoy a measure of security. Without Rube Foster's historic achievement, it is fair to say, black baseball might not have survived for another quarter century, and the nation might never have heard of Jackie Robinson."<sup>14</sup> A short while later, Ed Bolden from Philadelphia organized an Eastern league that he figured could

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>12</sup> Wilson, August. *Fences*. (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2007) p. 21.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Holway, 6.

compete against Foster's Negro National League. The "Hilldales, Atlantic City Bacharach's, Baltimore Black Sox, New York Lincoln Giants, Brooklyn Royals, and the Harrisburg Giants" were the first teams to make up what would be known as the Eastern Colored League.<sup>15</sup> Foster was not as enthusiastic as Bolden would have liked and refused a World Series competition. Holway explains that the Eastern Colored League contented itself to play big league white teams, frequently outplaying them. The losses did not bode well for the major leagues. The challenge against the East Colored League "was the last time a big-league club could play the blacks while wearing its own uniform. The new commissioner, perhaps embarrassed by the scores, issued orders against it. Henceforth, the big leaguers would have to call themselves "all-stars" if they wanted to **barnstorm.**"<sup>16</sup> As feared, black teams beat barnstorming white big leaguers more often than they lost. Between 1886 and 1948 [Holway] uncovered newspaper box scores of 445 games between them. The blacks won 269, lost 172 and tied 4."<sup>17</sup>

By 1923 black baseball players from cities throughout the country had the opportunity to play and if they made a team, to chase after an exciting pennant race in one of two first-rate leagues. Life was not necessarily easy in the Negro Leagues, though. They "played 80 to 120 game a season while the major leaguers played 154."<sup>18</sup> It was intense and tiring but for men who loved the game, a dream come true. When traveling the players often encountered white protest to their presence. They usually ate and slept on the buses, as few restaurants, grocery stores or hotels served black patrons.<sup>19</sup> To keep their spirits up, Kadir Nelson explains that "most of the Negro League baseball teams had

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., xviii, xix.

<sup>18</sup> Nelson, 24.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

a quartet of men that would sing on the bus rides from town to town, keeping the rest of the team entertained.”<sup>20</sup> They would recruit other players as they traveled to small towns, some of which had black colleges.<sup>21</sup> Black ball teams would roll through town and recruit young players. Indeed, Nelson found that “there were several players in the Negro Leagues who were college educated.”<sup>22</sup>

On the field, these were tremendous but scrappy athletes. Nelson explains that the baseball used in the Negro Leagues was a Wilson ball, “not as lively as the expensive ball they used in the majors,” and wonders what “Josh Gibson or Norman “Turkey” Stearnes would have hit [with] that kind of ball.”<sup>23</sup> Nelson also explains that the bats were bought off the shelf, not custom made as they were for the major leagues. Nelson paints the Negro Leagues as a tough, hard-hitting environment fierce with competition:

We would do whatever it took to win. Pitchers threw anything and everything. Spitters, shine-balls, emery balls, cut balls—you name it. They cut that ball to pieces and had curveballs breaking about six feet! Throw a new white ball to the pitcher, and it would come back brown from all the tobacco juice and what-have-you. . . . And throwing at the batter was common. The pitcher would knock you down just to mess with your head. Look up at the umpire and he’d just say, “get up and play ball, son.” That’s why the batting helmet was invented. When Willie Wells was just a rookie, he found the ball was making its way toward his head a little more often than he liked, so he decided to wear an old miner’s helmet when he stepped up to the plate. Boy did they laugh at him! But today, you won’t find a ballgame played without batting helmets. . . . Base runners would spike you in a minute. . . . get in the runner’s way and he’d step on the catcher’s foot or run him right over, knock all his gear clear off. Come sliding in with his cleats high. Runners could tear your uniform off with those spikes. Some of those guys would sit in the dugout before the game filing their spikes, look at you and say, “this is for you.”<sup>24</sup>

Even with such fierce competition, sportsmanship in the Negro Leagues was customary.

Shortstop Jake Stephens recalled “By *God!* You’d be committing hara-kiri to get in the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid, 23.

<sup>21</sup> Davis, *ibid.* By 1890, the nation had established 17 black colleges; within a decade another 64 were added for a total of 81 by 1899. The South held 75 of these African-American schools. These colleges usually were one of four types: public or state-supported, land grant supported, church affiliated, and non-church-related private schools. The increased number after 1890 was partly due to the passage of the Morrill Land Grant Acts in 1862 and 1890. These laws provided federal support to those black colleges offering courses in agriculture, engineering, and home economics, or the industrial or vocational arts

<sup>22</sup> Nelson, 26.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 18.

way of Crush Holloway or Jimmy Lyons. They'd cut you to death. I mean, they'd sharpen their spikes before they went out onto the ball field." In reference to Crush Holloway, "the roughest base runner in the old Negro leagues," pitcher Bill Foster remembers, "Crush Holloway was fast. He was rough too. He'd put his spikes right here, in your mouth, if you opened it. But he was always nice. He'd hurt you, then jump up and say, 'Man, I'm sorry.' I'd say, 'Get out of here, Holloway'."<sup>25</sup> Assuming kindness for weakness was a grave mistake. These men were unafraid. They had fought to get to where they could play baseball and they were some of the best ballplayers in history. They were confrontational and fought to win both on and off the field. Oscar Charleston, another legendary ballplayer, was known for fighting. Once, he walked right up to a **Ku Klux Klansman** and pulled his hood clear off, exposing the man underneath the costume.<sup>26</sup> Even facing racism, playing with second-hand equipment and not being able to afford off-season training, Negro League ballplayers stood as some of the greatest baseball players in the country, and white ballplayers and sportswriters knew it.

In 1924 Rube Foster agreed to send his best team out east to play Ed Bolden's best. The Kansas City Monarchs traveled to Philadelphia to play the Hilldales. Foster met Bolden on the field and the two men shook hands over home plate, kicking off the first modern black World Series.<sup>27</sup> Holway called it a spectacular series of ten games in which the Monarchs were named the victors. Still, the reminder that black baseball, increasingly offering the most exciting games in the country, did not command the respect of larger America. As many accounts demonstrate, it was not for lack of skill that these players and their efforts went unnoted, but rather because of their color. For example, Holway

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<sup>25</sup> Holway, 59.

<sup>26</sup> Nelson, 21.

<sup>27</sup> Holway, 7.

points out that during the World Series event between the Monarchs and the Hilldales, one of the valuable Saturday games had to be rescheduled because the Kansas City stadium was hosting a high school football game.<sup>28</sup> Still, by the end of the decade, black ballplayers boasted “a final record for the decade of seventy-four victories and forty-one defeats against major league competition.”<sup>29</sup>

In the mid-1920s, Holoway explains that “**Booker T. Washington**’s paper, the *New York Age*, clamored for a four-way series among the Giants, Yankees, Lincolns and Royals for the championship of New York.” The Giants and the Yankees, both all-white teams, ignored the challenge. Holoway uncovered an article circulating about the proposed championship: “At least one white paper,” he found “the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, took up the cry. ‘There is some doubt,’ it wrote, ‘if baseball, after all, is the great American game. We play it, to be sure, but the colored people play it so much better that the time is apparently coming when it shall be known as the great African game...It requires some courage to predict that colored baseball, like colored pugilism, is to supersede the white brand, but someone has to think ahead and indicate whither we drift, and we therefore go on record as having said that it will’.”<sup>30</sup> What is interesting about this quote is not how readily this white sportswriter was willing to admit the expertise of black ballplayers, but that admitting their skill meant surrendering the “Americanness” of the game. While free and legal US citizens, black people were not considered Americans, even where whites acknowledged their talent or mere presence as part of American life.

“National League president Ford Frick said the league [had not used black players] because the public “has not been educated to the point where they will accept

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 5.

them.” The public was not necessarily the driving force behind keeping black ballplayers out of the big leagues. White major-leaguers were none too eager to open their ranks to men who had trounced them in barnstorm games. Masking their fear of fierce competition behind good old-fashioned racism, some white players riled up white fans deliberately. “Yankee outfielder Jake Powell blurted out in a radio interview that he was a policeman in the off-season and “enjoyed cracking niggers’ heads.”<sup>31</sup> But as Holway points out, “Powell had often barnstormed with blacks, who said they thought he was a fine fellow.”<sup>32</sup> Perhaps Powell was less concerned with skin color than he was the inevitable threat to his security as a major league player. Including black ballplayers in the big leagues would sharpen the game to a point with which many white players simply could not keep up. Indeed, between 1930 and 1939 black ballplayers had played 167 games against the white major league teams; they won 112, lost 52 and tied 3.<sup>33</sup>

Just as black baseball was beginning to take off, however, the country plunged into **The Depression**, stripping the Negro League ball clubs of any security or mobility for almost five years. That did not stop the rookies from encroaching on the ranks. Their skill was serious and their dreams big. When the opportunity to play professional baseball presented itself, no matter how meager the wages and modest the accommodations, they sprang at it.

So it was that in 1930 “nineteen-year-old Josh Gibson walked into the spotlight and began bashing eye-popping homers over every fence he saw.”<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 8.

## A LEGEND BEFORE HIS TIME

Troy Maxson embodies many of the men who played in the Negro Leagues but perhaps none more so than Josh Gibson, who died the same year Jackie Robinson stepped on the field for the Dodgers. Like Troy, Gibson was a big man whose strength intimidated people both on and off the field. When playing, Gibson was known for rolling up the sleeves of his jersey to show off his large biceps. He was 6'1" and weighed in over two hundred pounds at the peak of his career. Gibson had the record to prove it, but was never allowed to test his metal on a major league field. Holway explains that almost all of the men he interviewed were "confident that they could have been big-league stars."

'You just *knew* you were better than the major leaguers,' says peppery little Jake Stephens, a shortstop on the old Philadelphia Hilldales—"you just *knew* it. Why, Chick Galloway of the Athletics didn't have anywhere near the range I had at shortstop. He couldn't carry my glove."<sup>35</sup>

This kind of frustration was harder on some than others. Gibson, perhaps because his talent was so astronomical, had a particularly difficult time with the "gentleman's agreement" that kept black athletes from playing in the major leagues. At the time of his death, when Gibson was merely thirty-five years old, Holway describes him as a "broken, frustrated man, just too old to make the majors after so long a wait."<sup>1</sup> It is rumored that Josh Gibson suffered a depressive mental state and that he would occasionally fly into fits of rage or ramble on for some time hoping to purge his frustration. He reportedly suffered from debilitating headaches. In 1943 he slipped into a coma and was diagnosed with a brain tumor. In *Fences*, Troy is also hospitalized. He was thirty-seven at the time which would have landed him in Mercy Hospital in 1941 just two years before Josh Gibson's

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., xx.

hospitalization. His metaphorical tussle with Death as he endured the effects of pneumonia call to mind Gibson's coma from which he would periodically wake and talk deliriously. As he came to, Gibson refused the surgical removal of the tumor in his brain. He lived another four years before succumbing to a stroke.

Born in a small town in Georgia in 1911, Gibson spent fifteen years playing in the Negro Leagues and garnered a reputation as the best player in baseball history. He grew up poor, his father having abandoned his mother, which is a notable difference between Troy and Gibson. Troy's father supported eleven children; "he felt a responsibility toward us. Maybe he ain't treated us the way I felt he should have, but without that responsibility he could have walked off and left us, made his own way."<sup>36</sup> Like Troy, Gibson made his way north and landed in Pittsburgh. Alternating between the Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords, Gibson became a true hometown hero. His lifetime batting average fell between .354 and .384, with some accounts putting him at .426. He would regularly hit balls nearly 500 feet from home plate.<sup>37</sup> He was known as the best catcher and power batter in baseball and is noted in the Hall of Fame for almost 800 home runs during his career. Today many know of Gibson as "the black Babe Ruth," although given his stats there are those who would say that Babe was actually "the white Josh Gibson."

It is largely through historical research that Gibson's story has emerged. John Holway's massive oral history project went a long way in supporting Gibson's reputation. As Holway describes his project to document life in the Negro Leagues, his

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<sup>36</sup> Wilson, 49.

<sup>37</sup> *The Sporting News* of June 3, 1967 credits Gibson with a home run in a Negro League game at Yankee Stadium that struck two feet from the top of the wall circling the center field bleachers, about 580 feet from home plate. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josh\\_Gibson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josh_Gibson)

excitement at the preservation of this unique aspect of American history is contagious, and one can imagine men long-since retired from the game proudly reliving their days as giants of American baseball. “The language is direct. Sentences are declarative and short. Adjectives are few. Smiles abound. Humor is droll. The language is gentlemanly in contrast to much modern-day sports reporting. No expletives were deleted because few if any were used.”<sup>38</sup> Corroborating the stories was challenging but not impossible. “Many of the stories are confirmed—more drily, to be sure—in the microfilm files of old Negro newspapers (and in some white papers) in the Library of Congress,” where Holway spent time researching the annals for snatches and glimmers of the untold story.<sup>39</sup>

With the same jocular yarn-spinning evidenced in *Fences*, stories of the great and rough days of Negro League baseball still circulate. Two other Negro League giants Satchel Paige and **Cool Papa Bell** spent some time rooming with one another on the road and Paige remembered, “that man was so fast he could turn out the light and jump into bed before the room got dark.” When John Holway interviewed Bell, he found out that, “while [Paige] was out galavanting, Cool Papa discovered that the light switch was defective; there was a delay of a few seconds before the lights went out. When Satch came back, Bell instructed him, ‘sit down, I want to show you something.’ He flicked the switch, strolled over to bed, and pulled up the covers. Bing! The lights went out. ‘See Satchel,’ he said, ‘you been tellin’ people that story ‘bout me for years, and even *you* didn’t know it was true’.”<sup>40</sup>

Rumors about men playing with guns in their uniforms made the league seem pretty rough and tumble. Some of the stories were verified by newspaper articles, such as

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<sup>38</sup> Holway, xviii.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 107.

the one that made Wilber “Bullet” Rogan one of the most feared and respected umpires in the league. According to Kadir Nelson,

at one game in Kansas City, there were three umpires. Rogan was behind home plate, and the other two were at first and third. A play took place at third base, and Rogan ran down the line. He called the man out and the base umpire called him safe. They started to argue and got into a fight. Bullet Rogan pulled out a knife, and the other guy panicked and took off running toward the center-field fence and climbed over it. The next day it was in the papers. Rogan had a bad temper. We wouldn’t argue too much with him about balls and strikes. Whatever he called you, you would just let that go. He was old, but he’d fight you anyway.<sup>41</sup>

Unlike Troy, Gibson never did see a black man play in the major leagues, but for those that did, it was a long-awaited victory. Perhaps had he lived, Gibson would have similarly struggled with the mixed blessing of the Dodgers signing Jackie Robinson after his time had come and gone. More frequently though, the love of the game kept the giants from yesteryear rooting for the rookies who were steadily breaking the all-white ranks that had punished their forefathers so callously. “Cool Papa Bell, Mule Suttles, George Scales, Willie Wells and many others gave everything they had to helping the youngsters coming up.”<sup>1</sup>

It was a long time coming. It was not until the National League had seated a new commissioner that things in the major leagues began to change. Even though representatives from white ball clubs swore up one side and down the other that there was no law, formal or otherwise, preventing black players from entering the league, manager’s hands were tied. Several teams took a look at the startlingly talented rookie Jackie Robinson but none made a move to sign him. One manager, Leo Durocher of the Dodgers, even went so far as to say he wished he could sign a black ballplayer, but quickly recanted claiming that he had been misquoted in the *New York Daily Worker*

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<sup>41</sup> Nelson, 21.

when upper-level management realized he had let the cat out of the bag about the unspoken “gentlemen’s agreement.”<sup>42</sup>

Finally, in the spring of 1945 a new commissioner was assigned to the major leagues. According to Ric Roberts of the Pittsburgh *Courier*, A B “Happy” Chandler said, “I’m for the Four Freedoms. If a black boy can make it on Okinawa and Guadalcanal, he can make it in baseball.” The quote made it into the headlines of the Pittsburgh paper and the gates were finally opened to black ballplayers. By winter of that year, Branch Rickey had signed Jackie Robinson to the Brooklyn Dodgers.

While the integration of baseball did create opportunities for African Americans to play in the big leagues, it rendered the Negro Leagues all but obsolete. Holway recounts the last of the Negro League competitions:

In October of 1948 Satchel Paige got together one more club of youngsters to barnstorm against his world champion Cleveland Indian mates, Bob Lemon and Gene Bearden, plus Murray Dickson, Al Zarilla, Roy Partee, and others. To bolster the youngsters’ morale, he added forty-five-year-old Cool Papa Bell to the squad to play a few innings and lend his experience. In the final game, with Lemon on the mound, Bell walked and Paige laid down a neat sacrifice that pulled the third baseman off the bag, a classic example of the hit-and-run bunt that Rube Foster had perfected almost half a century earlier. Bell was almost to second when the ball hit and almost on third when the third baseman picked the ball up. When the startled catcher, Partee, ran down the line to cover third, Bell brushed right past him and raced across the wide-open plate. He had scored from first on a bunt!

Rube Foster’s ghost must have looked down and smiled. It was to be the last play in the history of the black ball days. A chapter of Americana had closed—forever.<sup>43</sup>

When word got out about the Dodgers signing Robinson, it became apparent that “the Sol Whites and Charley Grants, the Rube Fosters and the Josh Gibsons had come at last to the end of a long dark trail. The door had been opened, but it would not be they who would step inside.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Holway, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 14.

## **ONE DAY YOU WILL OVERSTAND: LANGUAGE AND RESISTANCE IN BLACK CULTURE**

Like sorting through the tales from the glory days of the Negro Leagues, many things in African American culture have meaning beyond the superficial and must be read on multiple levels. The American blues is a great example. Full of metaphor and double entendre what sounds innocent can actually be quite racy. In everyday vernacular, bad means good, being “down” for something is the equivalent of being “up” for something. The black American translation of language has created a remarkably vast and rich lexicon. It comes out of a strong tradition of resistance that turned even the most common elements of everyday life into small victories against oppression.

This tradition also kept alive the experiences that larger America would rather have forgotten: slavery, the slave trade, the lynchings and murders of innocent people, the daily assaults on the humanity of black people, segregation, the Ku Klux Klan, the racism rampant in the US Congress and judicial system evidenced by bills that were never ratified, verdicts which flew in the face of the founding tenets of the nation, and the concealment of the real source of wealth for America’s elected officials many of whom were slaveowners.

It is no wonder then, that the accomplishments of African Americans would not be remembered nor recorded if it were not for the efforts of the people themselves to preserve it. Whether in song, in letters, in legend or in prayer, African Americans strived to remember their history.

Wit, story and lies are a major part of African American culture and provide an important connection to the African roots of a people. In addition to an oral tradition that helped maintain history, storytelling has played an important role in preserving culturally

specific myths, lessons and legacies. The need to mask the true meaning of conversations from an oppressive population added yet another level of nuance and metaphor to black American storytelling. From the monkey and lion tales of Africa to the Br'er Rabbit and Fox tales in the US, black people have a rich history of exploring life and conflict through stories.

Perhaps no other American writer so eloquently captures this tradition of telling stories, tall-tales or lies, than August Wilson who depicts it most frequently amongst men in the black American community. Whether in diners, recording studios, on porches or in jitney cab offices, Wilson brings these rituals amongst men to full color. The tales they tell are at once funny and prophetic, implausible yet true. Through these stories Wilson's characters connect with one another, revisit the past, console each other and corroborate a history that was written out of the textbooks. It happens naturally, with the jocularity and familiarity of family. By sharing their experiences with one another, these men create a space for themselves in the world.

With *Fences*, Wilson deftly walks the fine line between fact, fiction and the black response to racism. The play is rich with reflection and storytelling. Troy loves to tell stories. As his best friend Bono says, "I know you got some of that **Uncle Remus** in your blood. You got more stories than the devil got sinners."<sup>45</sup> Indeed this is how the play begins, not with a traditional story, but with a *lie*:

BONO: Troy, you ought to stop that lying!

TROY: I ain't lying! The nigger had a watermelon this big. Talking about... "What watermelon, Mr. Rand?" I liked to fell out! "What watermelon, Mr. Rand?" And it sitting there big as life.

BONO: What Mr. Rand say?

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<sup>45</sup> Wilson, 12.

TROY: Ain't said nothing. Figure if the nigger too dumb to know he carrying a watermelon, he wasn't going to get much sense out of him. Trying to hide that great big old watermelon under his coat. Afraid to let the white man see him carry it home.<sup>46</sup>

In this context a “lie” is a yarn or a tall tale that blurs the line between fact and fiction. Usually embedded within lies is some kind of lesson, moral or adage. Aware of the insidious use of watermelons as prop pieces in many white depictions of black people, Troy recalibrates the story to mean that the black man was afraid of being “caught” with a watermelon by a white man. In this situation, the man could have been literally hiding the watermelon under his coat, or perhaps standing near it but unwilling to pick it up in front of a white man. By placing it within the context of racial stereotypes, Troy imparts a lesson within the “lie.” Whatever the scenario, if the effort was to keep the white man from cracking a joke about a black man with a watermelon, it worked. Denying something that is obvious alters the rules of engagement. The white man, Mr. Rand, went on about his business and left the man in peace, assuming as Troy suggests that the man was either dumb or plumb out of his mind.

In the call and response pattern, the ritual phrasing, “Stop that lying!” and “I ain't lying,” makes room for the story to come forth. These are the words that begin the play. It is akin to the Haitian tradition of beginning a story with the call “Krik?” and the response by listeners, “Kraak!” Similarly, these phrases can be used to punctuate the story, allowing for audience participation and to encourage the narrator to continue.

*Fences* is largely about negotiating the real from the legendary, the fact from the fiction, “how to tell where the shit lies, [and] how to tell it from the alfalfa.”<sup>47</sup>

Throughout the play Troy dances between two kinds of lies, the ones that impart lessons

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 60.

and preserve his experiences and culture, and the lie he is living by engaging in an affair with another woman. The difference between them is discernable largely in his reaction to the listener's response. Throughout the play Bono responds to Troy with "you lying." In the presence of others, Rose responds to Troy's tales with, "Troy lying." Even his son, Lyons, tells his father "you too much, Pops." Through these slight changes in rapport, Troy's loved ones establish their relationship with him, pulling stories out of him. Rose never uses this phrase when the two are alone, for in that situation it would be considered an accusation. Lyons does not tell his father that he's lying, but does gesture toward disbelief with respect. These gentle challenges actually make room for Troy to continue and even exaggerate his stories.

A wonderful example of this is the scene when Troy talks about meeting the devil:

TROY: Look here, Bono...I went down to see Hertzberger about some furniture. Got three rooms for two-ninety-eight. That's what it say on the radio. Three rooms...two-ninety-eight. Even made up a little song about it. Go down there...man tell me I can't get no credit. I'm working everyday and can't get no credit. What to do? I got an empty house with some raggedy furniture in it. Cory ain't got no bed. He's sleeping on a pile of rags on the floor. Working every day and can't get no credit. Come back home—Rose'll tell you—madder than hell. Sit down, try to figure out what I'm gonna do. Come a knock on the door. Ain't been living here but three days. Who know I'm here? Open the door...devil standing there bigger than life. White fellow...got on good clothes and everything. Standing there with a clipboard in his hand. I ain't had to say nothing. First words out of his mouth was "I understand you need some furniture and can't get no credit." I liked to fell over. He say I'll give you all the credit you want, but you got to pay the interest on it. I told him give me three rooms worth and charge whatever you want. Next day a truck pulled up here and two men unloaded them three rooms. Man what drove the truck give me a book. Say send ten dollars a month to the address in the book and everything will be all right. Say if I miss a payment the devil was coming back and it'll be hell to pay. That was fifteen years ago. To this day, the first of the month I send my ten dollars, Rose'll tell you.

ROSE: Troy lying.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 15.

Read on a superficial level, this is just another one of Troy's stories. In actuality, he is talking very wisely about American capitalism and the trap that awaits poor people. Troy's ultimate point is that if you are not earning the money for yourself, whatever you borrow will come to collect eventually. By relating it to the devil, he uncovers the situation for the immoral enterprise that it is. "Look here," Troy says, "I'll tell you this...it don't matter to me if he was the devil. It don't matter if the devil give credit. Somebody has got to give it."<sup>49</sup>

The lesson is informed by Troy's experience sharecropping as a child. "The only thing my daddy cared about was getting them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin. That's the only thing that mattered to him. Sometimes I used to wonder why he was living...Get them bales of cotton in to Mr. Lubin and find out he owe him money."<sup>50</sup> While the conversation is directed at Bono, Troy is actually counseling his own son about his irresponsibility with money. When Rose chides Troy for getting on his son Troy says, "I ain't bothering Lyons. Here...get you a drink. We got an understanding. I know why he come by to see me and he know I know."<sup>51</sup> Troy is careful not to directly criticize his son who is, at thirty-four years old, a grown man.

LYONS: Yeah, well, look here, Pop...let me have that ten dollars. I'll give it back to you. Bonnie got a job working at the hospital.

TROY: What I tell you, Bono? The only time I see this nigger is when he wants something. That's the only time I see him.

LYONS: Come on, Pop, Mr. Bono don't want to hear all that. Let me have the ten dollars. I told you Bonnie working.

TROY: What that mean to me? "Bonnie working." I don't care if she working. Go ask her for the ten dollars if she working. Talking about Bonnie working...why ain't you working?

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 13.

LYONS: Aw, Pop, you know I can't find no decent job. Where am I gonna get a job at? You know I can't get no job.

TROY: I told you I know some people down there. I can get you on the rubbish if you want to work. I told you the last time you came by here asking me for something.

LYONS: Naw, Pop...thanks. That ain't for me. I don't wanna be carrying nobody's rubbish. I don't wanna be punching nobody's time clock.

TROY: What's the matter? You too good to carry rubbish? Where you think that ten dollars you talking about come from? I'm just supposed to haul people's rubbish and give my money to you 'cause you too lazy to work. You too lazy to work and wanna know why you ain't got what I got.<sup>52</sup>

Troy is perhaps less appalled by Lyons' sentiments about trash collection because he realizes his son is lost. Troy is much harder on Cory, for example, whose future is still being shaped. Troy maintains a sense of propriety about black culture, business and American capitalism. Evident in the scene in which Rose and Troy argue about where to do their grocery shopping, Troy is concerned with community solidarity. His relationship with Bella is decidedly different from his relationship with white lenders:

BONO: ...I didn't know I could do better. I thought only white folks had inside toilets and things.

ROSE: There's a lot of people don't know they can do better than they doing now. That's just something you got to learn. A lot of folks still shop at Bella's.

TROY: Ain't nothing wrong with shopping at Bella's. She got fresh food.

ROSE: I ain't said nothing about if she got fresh food. I'm talking about what she charge. She charge ten cents more than the A&P.

TROY: The A&P ain't never done nothing for me. I spends my money where I'm treated right. I go down to Bella, say. "I need a loaf of bread, I'll pay you on Friday," she give it to me. What sense that make when I got money to go and spend it somewhere else and ignore the person who done right by me? That ain't in the Bible.

ROSE: We ain't talking about what's in the Bible. What sense it make to shop there when she overcharge?

TROY: You shop where you want to. I'll do my shopping where the people been good to me.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 16-17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 7.

Loyalty to black owned businesses and pride in one's labor—no matter how menial—seem at times archaic in *Fences*. Like Lyons' refusal to work alongside his father, these are themes that Wilson will explore again in later years. In both *King Hedley II* and *Radio Golf* the younger generations seem less and less grateful for the sacrifices that their elders have made. In this case, Lyons has no problem with his dad—a legendary baseball player—collecting trash, but he refuses to do it—and yet he borrows money from his father and feels no shame in that. Lyons rationalizes this ask by saying “I ain't asked you to give me nothing, I asked you to loan me ten dollars.” Indeed when Lyons comes around again it is to repay his father for the money he has borrowed. Troy refuses—believing that it is more important for his son to save his money than to borrow it from someone else to repay him.

#### **LIVING WITH A FULL COUNT: LOVING TROY MAXON**

A common sense of entitlement runs deep within the Maxon men, though it manifests itself in different ways. Just as Troy's father felt perfectly justified in trying to have his way with Troy's girlfriend, Troy feels justified in his extramarital affair with Alberta, Lyons feels justified being unemployed and living off his girlfriend because his music is what matters most to him, and Cory feels justified in disrespecting and lying to his father because he is good at football. Ultimately each of these men is thinking primarily about himself. Each has his own philosophy that explains his actions, often grounded in what the world dictates. They also each justify their choices with a sense of duty they try to fulfill. Even as each struggles to be his own man, they are more alike than they are different.

It is no secret that Troy Maxon is a difficult man. His loved ones have learned to negotiate with him to keep his temper from bubbling over, to help him feel secure and loved, to guide him when life begins to pull him off track. It is a skill, one learned by a family that feels simultaneously blessed and burdened by him.

Like many men who reached the apex of their manhood in poverty and during segregation, Troy has his own moral compass. At fourteen years old he left the tyranny of his father's house in Alabama and headed north to Pittsburgh where he found black people living under bridges and in tar paper shacks. Without a place to live and no prospects of a job available to him, Troy stole food to survive. His logic told him that he had no other options and he "figured, hell, if I steal money I can buy me some food. Buy me some shoes too."<sup>54</sup> Alone in the world, he found comfort in the arms of a woman. She became pregnant and Troy's moral compass told him he had to provide for his child—something his father had always done—but he had nothing to give. He began robbing people, holding them up for money. One day he tussled with the wrong man, got shot, mortally knifed the man and landed himself in jail. Fifteen years of his life went by in the penitentiary where ironically he was safe, given steady meals, and made a lifelong friend—Jim Bono. It was in prison that Troy learned to play baseball, to develop a skill that would provide a living for him once he got out.

In the Negro Leagues Troy was finally good at something—great at something, one of the best. On the baseball field a man was judged by his talent. The rules of the game were clear and if he played by the rules and won, no one could take that from him. He had come up hard but found a way to make his life mean something. Even though many of the black ballplayers would have relished in an opportunity to compete against

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 53.

or alongside the white major league ball clubs, they resolved themselves to the fact that it was not going to happen. In this realm, inside the comforts and confines of his own culture, Troy was a legend. He met Rose, got married and a year later had a son. For six years they lived together happily until the world as Troy had known it changed forever. In the winter of 1945 Jackie Robinson crossed the color line, becoming the first black man to play for a major league baseball team in over sixty years.

It takes a long time for a man to come to a place where he is comfortable with himself, with his accomplishments and limitations. Since the day that Robinson stepped out onto the field suited up in a Brooklyn Dodgers uniform Troy had fought to do that. He convinced himself that he could be satisfied with living “a clean, hard, useful life.”<sup>55</sup> Yet he had never quite gotten over the fact that had it been for five years, Troy may have been able to play in the major leagues. He could have swung and hit the baseball further than almost any white man in the league. Race would not have mattered then—Troy would have stood there at home plate on his own merit.

That time never did come for Troy Maxon and it is an injustice he cannot let go. The recent accomplishments of young black players are cheapened because of the history and the fact that the rookies are most often sitting on the bench.

ROSE: They got a lot of colored boys playing ball now. Baseball and football.

BONO: You right about that, Rose. Times have changed. Troy just come along too early.

TROY: There ought not never have been no time called too early! Now, you take that fellow... What's that fellow they had playing left field for the Yankees back then? You know who I'm talking about, Bono. Used to play left field for the Yankees?

ROSE: Selkirk?

TROY: Selkirk! That's it! Man batting .269, understand? .269. What kind of sense that

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 67.

make? I was hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs! Man batting .269 and playing left field for the Yankees! I saw Josh Gibson's daughter yesterday. She walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet. Now I bet you Selkirk's daughter ain't walking around with raggedy shoes. I bet you that!

ROSE: They got a lot of colored baseball players now. Jackie Robinson was the first. Folks had to wait for Jackie Robinson.

TROY: I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball, then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play, then they ought to have let you play.<sup>56</sup>

Almost worse than never seeing a black man play in the major leagues was seeing it happen just a few short years after he was eligible to be that man. Rose tries to put Troy's experience in perspective for him, help him see that their son has an opportunity to do something that Troy could not do. She is at once consoling and optimistic. Troy reads her tone as argumentative, but in truth it is not Rose who Troy argues against. It is the years gone, the words unsaid, the thanks never given, the opportunity missed. This is what Troy argues against, like ghosts he is haunted by things he cannot change and is yet too hurt to imagine that hope could lie somewhere ahead, even in the talent and passion of his own son. This conflict is visible in their exchanges.

The same personalized sense of right and wrong that has helped Troy cope with the racism that poisoned his experience with baseball is what justifies his affair with Alberta. Just like baseball, with his marriage Troy feels he has done all he was supposed to, all that was necessary out of the deal. After eighteen years of going to work as a garbage man—when in another world he was a legend—after eighteen years of coming home and giving Rose the money he was able to earn by virtue of his strength to lift trash bins day in and day out, after seeing that his son had a roof over his head, food in his

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 9.

belly, clothes on his back, was in school and respectful of his mother, after eighteen years of living “right” drinking only once a week with his friend Bono, Troy felt justified in indulging that place inside him he had ignored for so long. The place that basked in adoration, the part of himself that was more than and different from a garbage man, a husband and a father, a part of him he had enjoyed only a short while before he realized his time in the spotlight had come and gone. As long as he was a dutiful husband and father, he was entitled to his life with Alberta. “Rose,” Troy explains, “I don’t mess up my pay. You know that now. I take my pay and I give it to you. I don’t have no money but what you give me back. I just want to have a little time to myself... a little time to enjoy life.”<sup>57</sup>

Rather than embrace the quiet of his life, Troy saw his life with Rose as dutiful living, a penance. He put the accountability for that life on Rose, without her asking for it, as though it was her who kept him from recognizing the potential for enjoyment and peace. But as Troy said, he opted not to do that. He saw his choice to settle down and get married as a “bunt,” never feeling as if he had gone out with that power swing.

TROY: When I found you and Cory and a halfway decent job, I was safe. Couldn’t nothing touch me. I wasn’t going to strike out no more. I wasn’t going back to the penitentiary. I wasn’t going to lay in the streets with a bottle of wine. I was safe. I had me a family. A job. I wasn’t gonna get that last strike. I was on first looking for one of them boys to knock me in. To get me home. ... It’s not easy for me to admit that I been standing in the same place for eighteen years.<sup>58</sup>

Troy was waiting for something, as he said, waiting for the hit that could bring him home. What he did not realize was that he was no longer standing on the same field—that in this game, he was already home, already safe.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 68.

Many of the stars of the Negro Leagues saw a place for themselves in integrated baseball, even if it was not on the field. They coached the rookies and helped them sharpen their skills so that they could play the best baseball possible and represent African Americans with pride and dignity. Their hard-earned glory came in the faces of the young ones coming up:

Should the black stars have raised black fists and demanded integration? Would such a tactic have worked? Probably not—not given the world of thirty to forty years ago.... Instead of speeding integration, they might have set it back by decades. So they bit their lips and waited, and when the door was finally opened, they stepped back like Moses on Pisgah and watched the rookie, Jackie Robinson, walk through, while they remained outside, cheering him on.<sup>59</sup>

It was not just Troy's experience with baseball that informed his understanding of right and wrong. He learned hard lessons at a young age, came up struggling for everything he had. In his mind, to work in service of someone else was the highest testament to commitment, but given his failed dreams, he also saw himself as a martyr. So caught up in himself, what Troy never fully realized was that Rose had made concessions to live with him as well.

Like many of the Negro League players, Troy likely had scores of women following him during his career. Bono says it himself:

BONO: Troy, I done known you seem like damn near all my life. You and Rose both. I done known both of you for a long time. I remember when you met Rose. When you was hitting them baseballs out the park. A lot of them old gals was after you then. You had the pick of the litter. When you picked Rose, I was happy for you. That was the first time I knew you had any sense.<sup>60</sup>

Given that Troy is famous for “eyeing the women,” to have caught his eye apart from the rest of the women, Rose is likely attractive. This is the element that Troy misses—he does not consider the other options Rose had. When she insinuates that she had wants and

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<sup>59</sup> Holway, xx.

<sup>60</sup> Wilson, 60.

needs that had gone unanswered for years of living with him he becomes furious with her. She chose Troy because she loves him, not because of what he could provide her with. The life of a garbage man is not a glamorous one—a smart woman, Rose knew that Troy would not be able to play baseball forever. She also knew that he was uneducated, almost illiterate. With him, prospects were slim.

Not unlike Troy, Rose bore down against that realization too, yet she never felt entitled to private time or the option to go outside their marriage to search for consolation. Instead, Rose felt she was entitled to reciprocity; the same love and commitment she offered Troy, she expected in return. His commitment to his life as a laborer, husband and father prompted him to look outside that life for solace; her commitment to her life as homemaker, wife and mother prompted her to look inside that life for comfort. Ultimately, neither found what they were looking for. Each talks about “latching on” to the other, Rose tells Troy that in times of doubt he should have done what she did, held on tighter. Eventually, each so hungry for security and family in this world, both suffocated. Troy says, “You ain’t the blame Rose. A man couldn’t ask for no woman to be a better wife than you’ve been. I’m responsible for it. I done locked myself into a pattern trying to take care of you all that I forgot about myself.”<sup>61</sup> Rose echoes a similar sentiment, “When [he] walked through the house he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me, for my part in the matter.”<sup>62</sup> The tragedy of the relationship between Troy and Rose is that each was looking to the other to fill up the emptiness deep inside; personal failings and disappointments, insecurities that went unchecked, hopes never fully realized. In the end,

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 93.

they lived like lonely planets, each orbiting the same sun, but too wounded to find their way back to one another.

*Fences*, which premiered in 1987, was in a way a precursor to the wisdom Wilson would explore later when he wrote *Gem of the Ocean*. In this play, set at the turn of the century, blossoming love between people was based on being right with oneself first; a man could not come to a woman looking to fill her up and be filled up by her. The physical act of lovemaking was not enough to ground a man inside himself, or usher a woman into the full breadth of her capacity to receive and shape those she chose to love. In Wilson's oeuvre, this wisdom belonged to the elders. The younger generations seem to have lost track of it. Wilson's keen understanding of the experience of blackness as bodily, of the flesh, provided fertile territory for him to explore the ways in which black men and women experienced their bodies, used their bodies, sold their bodies, to survive and live through the fact of being born black. It is perhaps not a coincidence that Troy Maxon, who fumbles so with love and his own sense of self-worth was born in the same year that *Gem of the Ocean* was set, 1904. He is heir to a legacy of wisdom from which he has cut himself off because he cannot let go of his major league dreams and the wrong that was done to him at the hands of the white establishment.

Rose understands this. Her capacity for tolerance and forgiveness are sprung from the wounds Troy still harbors. It is in part for this reason that she understands what is happening with Troy before he admits to the affair. For example, after Gabriel's visit, Troy reflects upon the fact that if it were not for the meager compensation awarded to his brother after his injury, Troy would not have his home and what small security it affords his family. Desperate for some measure of his own worth and masculinity as the

breadwinner in the household, Troy leaves to console himself with the one dream he seems to think will not fail him, another woman. Rose calls upon him to remember where his real strength lies, “Where you going off to? You been running out of here every Saturday for weeks. I thought you was going to work on this fence?”

The fence, Troy’s weekly project, is Rose’s attempt to refocus Troy’s attention and dedication to his own family.

CORY: I don’t see why Mama want a fence around the yard nowadays.

TROY: Damn if I know either. What the hell she keeping out with it? She ain’t got nothing nobody want.

BONO: Some people build fences to keep people out...and some people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you.<sup>63</sup>

Troy means to say that *he* has nothing worth value to outsiders. He does not consider his wife and son in this equation, he is thinking primarily about objects—things that can be stolen. But Rose does have something that someone else wants. Alberta wants Troy. Perhaps Rose suggested that Troy take up this project because she knew the only time he would have to complete it was on the weekends, a way to keep him around the house. She also likely hoped that it would be time for Cory to spend with his father, perhaps repairing some of the animosity between them and helping them to bond. While Troy seems either blind or willfully ignorant of Rose’s gentle corrections, Bono understands clearly. “Rose’ll keep you straight,” he tells his friend. “You get off the track, she’ll straighten you up.”<sup>64</sup>

#### **FAMILIES MADE AND FOUND: FRIENDSHIP AMONGST MEN**

Troy’s lifelong friend Bono largely mediates the relationship between he and Rose. Without Bono, conversations between Troy and Rose are not as playful, focusing

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 54.

more on issues with their son Cory or Troy's brother Gabriel. By virtue of his presence, Bono facilitates Troy's mischievous flirtation with Rose, making room for Troy to tease his wife, compliment her, demonstrate that he loves her in his own way. The story of their meeting, for example, changes a bit with Bono listening—Troy embellishes the story or alters pieces of it to make room for Rose to participate in the telling of it, allowing her some ownership of the story too.

TROY: ...Saw Rose and latched on to her. I latched onto her and told her—I'm gonna tell you the truth—I told her, "Baby, I don't wanna marry, I just wanna be your man." Rose told me...tell him what you told me, Rose.

ROSE: I told him if he wasn't the marrying kind, then move out the way so the marrying kind could find me.

TROY: That's what she told me. "Nigger, you in my way. You blocking the view! Move out the way so I can find me a husband." I thought it over two or three days. Come back—

ROSE: Ain't no two or three days nothing. You was back the same night.

TROY: Come back, told her "Okay, baby...but I'm gonna by me a banty rooster and put him out there in the backyard, and when he see a stranger come, he'll flap his wings and crown..." Look here, Bono, I could watch the front door by myself; it was that backdoor I was worried about.

ROSE: Troy you ought not talk like that. Troy ain't doing nothing but telling a lie.

TROY: Only thing is, when we first got married, forget the rooster—we ain't had no yard!<sup>65</sup>

Without Bono there, this kind of rapport between Rose and Troy would not be possible. Bono also allows Troy to voice some of his own concerns. According to this passage, it seems that Troy was concerned about committing to marriage because he was afraid his wife might be adulterous. Likely Troy would not even broach the subject if he believed there was a remote possibility that she were. However, with Bono listening Troy is communicating on multiple levels. On the one hand he is acknowledging the thoughts of

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 7.

adultery in his own mind and projecting his fears of getting caught toward Rose on the other. There are important insights to be found even in this jovial exchange.

Just before Rose enters this scene Bono cautiously broaches the subject of Troy's interest in another woman. Alberta, fresh up from Tallahassee, Florida, is a newcomer to Pittsburgh and has caught the interest of most of the men with her tendency to hang out at the local watering hole. Bono has watched Troy entertain his fancy for Alberta, and has even seen his friend walking nearby the place where she rooms. His warning is cordial—cautious so as not to spark Troy's famous temper—but serious nonetheless.

BONO: How you figure he making out with that gal be up at Taylor's all the time...that Alberta gal?

TROY: Same as you and me. Getting just as much as we is. Which is to say nothing.

BONO: It is, huh? I figure you doing a little better than me...and I ain't saying what I'm doing.

TROY: Aw nigger, look here...I know you. If you had got anywhere near that gal, twenty minutes later you gonna be looking to tell somebody. And the first one you gonna tell...that you gonna want to brag to...is gonna be me.

BONO: I ain't saying that. I see where you be eyeing her.

TROY: I eye all the women. I don't miss nothing. Don't never let nobody tell you Troy Maxon don't eye the women.

BONO: You been doing more than eyeing her. You done bought her a drink or two.

TROY: Hell yea, I bought her a drink! What that mean? I bought you one, too. What that mean 'cause I buy her a drink? I'm just being polite.

BONO: It's all right to buy her one drink. That's what you call being polite. But when you wanna be buying two or three...that's what you call eyeing her.<sup>66</sup>

In this clever exchange between friends, the language slips slightly but importantly. Bono uses the term “eyeing” to mean two things; on the one hand it means that Troy has taken an interest in Alberta, on the other hand it means that he has begun to act on his desire for her. The way that Bono describes it demonstrates that the budding connection between

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 3.

his friend and this woman is a slippery slope in which Troy might find himself entangled enough to lose what Bono sees as a precious relationship with Rose.

It happens again later,

BONO: I see you and that Tallahassee gal—that Alberta—I see you all done got tight.

TROY: What you mean “got tight?”

BONO: I see where you be laughing and joking with her all the time.

TROY: I laughs and jokes with all of them, Bono. You know me.

BONO: That ain’t the kind of laughing and joking I’m talking about.<sup>67</sup>

In fact, Bono spends most of the play warning Troy against consummating his interest in Alberta at the expense of his relationship with Rose. By talking indirectly about the situation, Bono wards off Troy’s anger but still gets his point home.

BONO: Troy, I done known you seem like damn near all my life. You and Rose both. I done known both of you for a long time. I remember when you met Rose. When you was hitting them baseballs out the park. A lot of them old gals was after you then. You had the pick of the litter. When you picked Rose, I was happy for you. That was the first time I knew you had any sense. I said, “My man Troy knows what he’s doing; I’m gonna follow this nigger, he might take me somewhere.” I been following you too. I done learned a heap of things about life watching you. I done learned how to tell where the shit lies, how to tell it from the alfalfa. You done learned me a lot of things. You showed me how not to make the same mistakes, to take life as it comes along and keep putting one foot in front of the other.

*(Pause.)*

Rose a good woman, Troy.<sup>68</sup>

While Bono’s track is rather circuitous, there is intention behind his delivery. His point is sound, but it arrives in a round-about kind of way, edged with compliments so as not to run full-force into a man who will fight at the drop of a hat. It echoes the West African wisdom that said it was better to circle around toward something than head at it directly. This is represented in many textile patterns; the interruption of lines are said to ward of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 60.

evil or malicious intent. Robert Farris Thompson has found correlative themes in American slave cabins wherein slaves decorated the walls with newsprint so that the lines of text met and changed direction in a repetitive manner to ward off evil spirits from a resting place.<sup>69</sup> While an outsider might find this reasoning illogical, in fact it is an effort to anticipate the response of external forces and quite deft indeed.

Bono also has his own line and he is trying as best he can to keep Troy from crossing it. After he broaches the subject of Alberta for the last time, Bono says, “Well, that’s all I got to say. I just say that because I love you both.”<sup>70</sup> Bono’s patience for Troy’s mischief has worn thin. He can foresee the outcome and in a rather resigned manner, he makes one last attempt to correct his friend before it is too late. As Bono recalls the lessons he has learned from Troy, he is sharing one of his own—don’t let history repeat itself, learn from your mistakes, be grateful for what you have. He knows it is only a matter of time before Troy’s affair is out in the open.

#### **IN THE SHADOW OF GREATNESS: WAITING TO BLOOM**

While Rose never directly acknowledges it, it is clear that she is paying attention to her husband’s errant behavior. As Wilson explains, Rose understands that Troy has his faults. Wilson’s description of Rose reveals less about Rose’s character and more about the agreement she and her husband have tacitly struck:

She is ten years younger than Troy, and her devotion to him stems from her recognition of her life without him: a succession of abusive men and their babies, a life of partying and running the streets, the church, or aloneness with its attendant pain and frustration. She recognizes Troy’s spirit as a fine and illuminating one and she either ignores or forgives his faults, only some of which she recognizes.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy*. (New York: Vintage, 1983) 221-2.

<sup>70</sup> Wilson, 61.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

Even taking into account the time period and the limited opportunity for black people in America, Wilson's depiction of Rose's choices is reductive. Historically, black women have taken care of one another in ways that would afford a woman like Rose other options than resigning herself to spinsterhood or becoming swept up in the street life. What is missing in Wilson's early description of Rose is her own agency, her ability to choose Troy because of her desire for him. It is out of this, not the bleak lifestyle open to her without him, that she stays with him. As if he had to pass in order for Rose to articulate of her own desire, is not until after Troy's death she speaks with agency about her choices:

ROSE: When I first met your daddy I thought, here's a man I can lay down with and make a baby. That's the first thing I thought when I seen him. I was thirty years old and had done seen my share of men. But when he walked up to me and said, "I can dance a waltz that'll make you dizzy," I thought, Rose Lee, here is a man that you can open yourself up to and be filled to bursting. Here is a man that can fill all them empty spaces you been tipping around the edges of. One of them empty spaces was being somebody's mother. I married your daddy and settled down to cooking his supper and keeping clean sheets on the bed. When your daddy walked through the house, he was so big he filled it up. That was my first mistake. Not to make him leave some room for me, for my part in the matter. But at the time I wanted that. I wanted a house that I could sing in. And that's what your daddy gave me. I didn't know to keep up his strength I had to give up little pieces of mine. *I did that*. I took on his life as mine and mixed up the pieces so that you couldn't hardly tell which was which anymore. *It was my choice*. It was my life and I didn't have to live it like that.<sup>72</sup>

It is clear throughout the play that Rose understands Troy. The concessions she makes for him are frustrating for others to see, but she has a sense of her own commitment to him. She has seen Troy through his sadness, stayed by his side through the maddening hours when he relived his glory days and been there in the quiet of his resignation too. She shored him up, kept him focused on something other than the past—for eighteen years Rose and her son Cory were the present and the future for Troy. They were stability and strength. Troy's experience in the Negro Leagues made a legend out of

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 93-4. Emphasis mine.

the man he tried to be. When Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in his lifetime, he was too broken to celebrate. Far from his glory days to play but not far enough to recognize his window was closed, Troy was a walking wounded. He had not found the thing inside him he needed to heal and imagined that Alberta could fill up the emptiness he felt inside for the recognition he never received.

On the surface it seems that because he never received recognition for his immense talent, Troy has a difficult time recognizing the talent in his own son, Cory. Cory is treated differently than others because his father has grander expectations for him than he does for himself, his brother, his best friend or eldest son. Cory represents the untarnished dream, and when Troy realizes that Cory's heart's desire is to play football, he feels betrayed at the deepest level. Not only is his son ignoring the lessons Troy had to learn, as Troy feared, the blood coursing through Cory's veins is beginning to dictate his future.

In the following scene, Cory is likely trying to play with his father in the way he has seen Lyons and Bono do, jostling each other with challenges. But Cory does not have the intuitive qualities that Rose, Bono and Lyons have—whether it is his age, or his desperation to be recognized by his father as his own person—Cory cannot seem to connect with Troy. In juxtaposition to the good-natured challenges posed by the others that encourage Troy to share his opinions, experiences and feelings, Troy is silenced when his son Cory disrespectfully defies him. What begins as a son's attempt to bond with his father turns into a sad exchange in which the reality of a forgotten history hits home. Cory gets excited about the local major league team, the Pittsburgh Pirates. Troy is unimpressed:

CORY: The Pirates done won five in a row.

TROY: I ain't thinking about the Pirates. Got an all-white team. Got that boy...that Puerto Rican boy...Clemente. Don't even half-play him. That boy could be something if they give him a chance. Play him one day and sit him on the bench the next.

CORY: He gets a lot of chances to play.

TROY: I'm talking about playing regular. Playing everyday so you can get your timing. That's what I'm talking about.

CORY: They got some white guys on the team that don't play every day. You can't play everybody at the same time.

TROY: If they got a white fellow sitting on the bench, you can bet your last dollar he can't play! The colored guy got to be twice as good before he get on the team. That's why I don't want you all tied up in them sports. Man on the team and what it get him? They got colored on the team and don't play them. Same as not having them. All them teams the same.

CORY: The Braves got Hank Aaron and Wes Covington. Hang Aaron hit two home runs today. That makes forty-three.

TROY: Hank Aaron ain't nobody. That's the way you supposed to do. That's how you supposed to play the game. Ain't nothing to it. It's just a matter of timing....getting the right follow-through. Hell, I can hit forty-three home runs right now!

CORY: Not off no major-league pitching you couldn't.

TROY: We had better pitchers in the Negro League. I hit seven home runs off of Satchel Paige. You can't get no better than that!

CORY: Sandy Koufax. He's leading the league in strikeouts.

TROY: I ain't thinking of no Sandy Koufax nothing.

CORY: You got Warren Spahn and Lew Burdette. I bet you couldn't hit no home runs off of Warren Spahn.

TROY: I'm through with it now.<sup>73</sup>

In his eagerness to challenge his father, he places him in a situation in which Troy has nothing but his words to prove himself—he was never allowed, nor ever will be at this point in his life, to best a major league pitcher. Cory goes quickly and decisively to the deepest pain Troy carries. Ultimately Troy's response is to turn the focus away from himself and onto his son—not to wallow in the past but to think about the future. The first child that Troy has actually fathered (Lyons was born while Troy was locked up in the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 31-2.

penitentiary) Cory has experienced the brunt of his father's long struggle with the past and the confusion of the quickly advancing future. In his son he sees potential, the possibility to have opportunities, respect, that Troy never had, but his way of guiding Cory is to control him, and his inability to see that his son needs recognition as much as he did is ultimately what keeps them from reaching one another.

Rather than realizing that it was men like Troy who made it possible for Cory to even consider playing ball, or to go to college on an athletic scholarship, Cory imagines that his father is afraid his son will best him. "You ain't never gave me nothing. You ain't never done nothing but hold me back. Afraid was gonna be better than you."<sup>74</sup> In reality, Troy does not want his son to have his heart broken as his was.

ROSE: Why don't you let the boy go ahead and play football, Troy? Ain't no harm in that. He's just trying to be like you with the sports.

TROY: I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get. You the only decent thing that ever happened to me. I wish him that. But I don't wish him a thing else from my life. I decided seventeen years ago that boy wasn't getting involved in no sports. Not after what they did to me in the sports.

ROSE: Troy, why don't you just admit you was too old to play in the major leagues? For once... why don't you admit that?

TROY: What do you mean too old? Don't come telling me too old. I just wasn't the right color. Hell, I'm fifty-three years old and I can do better than Selkirk's .269 right now!

ROSE: How was you gonna play ball when you was over forty? Sometimes I can't get no sense out of you.

TROY: I got good sense, woman. I got sense enough not to let my boy get hurt over playing no sports. You been mothering that boy too much. Worried about if people like him.

ROSE: Everything that boy do he do for you. He wants you to say "Good job, son." That's all.

TROY: Rose, I ain't got time for all that. He's alive. He's healthy. He's got to make his own way. I made mine. Ain't nobody gonna hold his hand when he get out there in that world.

ROSE: Times have changed from when you was young, Troy. People change. The world's changing around you and you can't even see it.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 36-7.

Cory thinks that in order to establish himself as a man he has to diminish his father's greatness. Knowing that Troy is deeply wounded from not being recognized as one of the greats and a major league baseball player, Cory misconstrues his father's tough love for jealousy at the opportunities he has. In the end, they are more alike than they are different. Each struggles with his father's legacy and power:

CORY: The whole time I was growing up, living in this house, Papa was like a shadow that followed you everywhere. It weighed on you and sunk into your flesh. It would wrap around you and lay there until you couldn't tell which one was you anymore. That shadow digging into your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you...

Troy echoes a similar sentiment as he talks about his father, but with the advantage of age, he realizes that he can make choices—he can respect his father for what he was and criticize him for what he was not, but ultimately Troy is responsible for his own life.

TROY: Right there is where I become a man...at fourteen years of age.  
(Pause.)  
Now it was my turn to run him off. I picked up the same reins that he had used on me. I picked up them reins and commenced to whupping on him. The gal jumped up and run off, and when my daddy turned to face me, I could see why the devil had never come to get him: 'cause he was the devil himself. I don't know what happened. When I woke up I was laying right there by the creek and Blue—this old dog we had—was licking my face. I thought I was blind. I couldn't see nothing. Both my eyes were swollen shut. I layed there and cried. I didn't know what I was gonna do. The only thing I knew was the time had come for me to leave my daddy's house. And right there the world suddenly got big. And it was a long time before I could cut it down to where I could handle it. Part of that cutting down was when I got to the place where I could feel him kicking in my blood and knew that the only thing that separated us was the matter of a few years.<sup>76</sup>

Eventually Rose warns Cory that “disrespecting your daddy ain't gonna make you a man, Cory. You got to find a way to come to that on your own.”<sup>77</sup> It is unfortunate that this lesson comes after his father has passed.

ROSE: You can't be nobody but who you are, Cory. That shadow wasn't nothing but you growing into yourself. You either got to grow into it or cut it down to fit you. But that's all you got to make life with. That's all you got to measure yourself against that world out there. Your daddy wanted you to be everything

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 92.

he wasn't...and at the same time he tried to make you into everything he was. I don't know if he was right or wrong, but I know he meant to do more good than he meant to do harm.<sup>78</sup>

In the end, both Rose and Cory seem to have made peace with Troy. Rose finds solace in Raynell, the little girl Troy brought home from the hospital after Alberta died. She says to Cory, "I'm going to do her just like your daddy did you...I'm gonna give her the best of what's in me."<sup>79</sup>

In the end, Troy exists in a world outside of everyone he has loved. Alberta, the woman he risked everything for, died in childbirth. Rose agrees to raise the child but has separated herself from her husband—even though they share the same household, Troy has little bearing on her choices any longer. Bono, who tried to warn Troy time and again finally tired of him and no longer visits. Lyons is locked up in jail, Gabriel hospitalized because of his apparent madness, and Troy ran Cory off after he challenged his father and told him "you don't count around here no more."<sup>80</sup>

In the end, it is clear that the respect Troy has lost was not for his legendary baseball prowess. His family and friends loved and respected him rather for his ordinariness, for his ability to make it through each day, knowing that he had been so much more at one time and still able to persevere. This element of Troy's life was what gave people hope—gave Bono, Rose, Lyons and even Cory permission to love him in spite of his faults. When he succumbed to his desire for Alberta, imagining he was entitled to something in exchange for the dutiful life he lived, the blush came off the rose so to speak. His fall from grace was quiet and slow, like the bitterness that ate away at

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 92-3.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 84.

him year after year. Unable to fight the real forces that oppress him, Troy projected his frustrations and anger onto those who are closest to him. Ultimately this is his downfall.

Ironically it is Raynell who helps Cory to the other side of his anger about his father. She asks him if he knew Blue, the dog that Troy used to sing about.

TROY: You hear this, Bono? I had me an old dog used to get uppity like that. You say, comere, Blue...and he just lay there and look at you. End up getting a stick and chasing him away trying to make him come.

ROSE: I ain't studying you and your dog. I remember you used to sing that old song.

TROY: (He sings)  
I had a dog his name was Blue  
You know Blue was mighty true  
You know Blue was a good old dog  
Blue treed a possum in a hollow log

ROSE: Don't nobody wanna hear you sing that old song. Used to have Cory running around here singing that song.

BONO: Hell I remember that myself.

TROY: That was my daddy's song. My daddy made up that song.<sup>81</sup>

As Cory remembers the song and finds the strength to sing it, he finally honors the legacy of his father and joins the line of Maxon men, for better or for worse, "the crooked with the straights."

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 41-2.

## Spotlight interview with Lou Bellamy

By Stephanie Lein Walseth

September 3, 2008

at Penumbra Theatre

**Lein Walseth:** As this production of *Fences* is running, we find ourselves in a unique political moment that merits our attention. With Barack Obama being the Democratic candidate for president, how do you think his campaign and the dialogue around it affect the work and the stories that August Wilson tells? It seems as if the Obama narrative is often shaped as one of 'exceptionalism,' whereas Wilson seems to focus on the everyman and woman in the African American community.

**Bellamy:** Wilson tends to find epic proportions in everyday black life, and the degree to which that is reflected in Obama's position and rise is really interesting. He is, by all measures, a very average person. I mean, he came from average beginnings. Middle-America. Of course, Hawaii, we'll let that go, it's a little exotic, but those are his beginnings. What August tends to celebrate is the way those everyday choices—when connected to a continuum of parents, aunts, grandparents, forefathers and so on—begin to show a wave, or a current that runs through the people. Mr. Wilson calls it "the blood memory." I tend to think of the world only in terms of my sixty years. But, when you begin to look at yourself as part of that longer continuum, then it begins to gain a certain amount of power. You find that many times your individual choices are shaped by your environment, history, and a culture about which you may or may not be aware. Wilson tends to write in those huge cultural kinds of moments, and Senator Obama acknowledges all of that history. In fact, his unique history, in not having dealt with slavery, positions him, in my view, in a very strong place in the United States. He is a black man, an American, who isn't marked by that terrible institution and the relationships it created between whites and blacks. So, he comes to the table fresh. It allows him a latitude that few blacks born of American ancestors have.

**Lein Walseth:** Interesting. In terms of the continuum you mention, you touched on another one of my questions, which has to do with the intergenerational conflicts that you note in your Artistic Director's statement for the season. I would say that this definitely emerges as one of

the dominant themes in *Fences*. Tell me a little bit about how you see that conflict played out in this piece.

**Bellamy:** It's so interesting, the intergenerational effect of white racism on Troy Maxon. He wages battles against it constantly, although it's rather tangential to the story. It is there, sort of in the background, and it shapes his choices, just like we were talking about with the previous question. He makes individual choices based upon his experience, and his experience is warped by racism, so he cannot see, for instance, that Cory could turn a football scholarship into something positive. He only knows the way he was robbed of *his* dream because of the racism that only allowed him to play in the Negro Leagues. So, it's there.

I also love the way August takes responsibility for blacks being prepared to fight racism. You remember that scenes where Troy describes his fights and eventual victories in the argument with his boss about the policy that keeps whites driving the garbage trucks and blacks walking behind, lifting and emptying the garbage cans? Then after he wins the argument, it becomes evident that he doesn't have a driver's license! So he's not prepared to actualize the hard-fought victory that he's won. He has to go back and become educated on how to drive. *Then* he can do it. So, although it isn't always mentioned, racism, and its affect upon the individual, is there, shaping this family in so many ways. You hear Bono say, "I thought only white folks had inside toilets." It's these little bitty things that shape one's view of the world. What is so tragic about Troy is that he can't see it, even though his wife tries to get this through to him. She says, "It's there and you can't even see it." And he won't because he's been shaped, he's been fired in a kiln that has inured all of this stuff in him and it's unchangeable. That's the pity of it; that children can be shaped in that same sort of way. How will Cory play out? Black families have always tried to shield their children from that, but they can't. They have to grow up and they have to go past the protection of that shield that their parents put around them. I remember when they burned that cross in front of my grandmother's house, how I kept trying to turn around and she kept turning my head around and putting it in her bosom so I couldn't. But she couldn't stop me from seeing those flames, you know? It's a tough row to hoe.

**Lein Walseth:** Yes, absolutely.

**Bellamy:** It shapes you and... it makes you into something that otherwise, I think you would not be.

**Lein Walseth:** You raise an issue that is present in all of Wilson's work, which is his ability to locate the experiences of a people in one family, in one play, in one decade, and then to connect those individuals to the larger community and the larger structural issues and events of that socio-historical moment. So, what would you say we could extrapolate about the larger African American experience and the living legacy of slavery in the 1950s from the Maxon family?

**Bellamy:** Here again, in *Fences*, that continuum is so clear. When Troy left after the fight with his father, he says it was 1918, and he was 14 years old. Which means that his father was most likely around during slavery, or was one of the first generation of sharecroppers. And that system was set up, as you well know, so that the southern planter aristocracy could keep slavery going for a few more years. These blacks didn't have land, they didn't have anything. They were turned loose after slavery like cattle. The slave owners just opened up the proverbial gate and said, "Here, off you go." Well, go where? Do what? So this first generation of freed slaves had no land base and they had no power. Forty acres and a mule didn't happen for most of them. So, they were forced to enter into these sharecropping agreements where they bartered their bodies again, their hard work, for *maybe* a promise of buying some land and a share of the harvest. Troy talks about how his father was shaped by that system, about how mean it made him, and how he would work the whole family, just like in slavery, just so they could get enough money to make this little note, only to find out at the end of the year that they "owed Mister Lubin money." Now, how does that shape Troy? Well, he had to enter into this relationship with his father. He fought him, he had to leave, and the same thing ends up happening with Cory. So, these things are sort of passed down.

Ntozake Shange has this wonderful quote about minstrelsy and I'm sure that one could apply it to slavery. She says, "We're not free from our paint yet." [laughs] And we're not free of those vestiges of slavery – what it did to the black family, what it did to the way we interact amongst ourselves based on color. It's underneath much of the interaction between blacks in America, and certainly the interaction between whites and blacks in America.

**Lein Walseth:** Definitely.

**Bellamy:** Oh yeah.

**Lein Walseth:** Again, just like you said, it's what makes this Obama campaign so unique and so interesting.

**Bellamy:** We are at a very interesting point in time.

**Lein Walseth:** Let's talk a little bit about Troy, specifically, because this is a role that you have played more than once, correct?

**Bellamy:** Twice, yeah.

**Lein Walseth:** Once in the 1997 production that Penumbra did at the Guthrie, and when was the other?

**Bellamy:** That production was in the 1989-1990 season. It ran here at Penumbra and then moved downtown for six months, in the space where the History Theatre is now. It used to be the old Actors' Theatre, and we were the first ones in their space after they closed. Coincidentally, they came to visit me and told me that we couldn't call ourselves professional because *they* were professional and we *weren't*. Well, they're defunct now and we're still going, so history has a way of writing itself... Anyway, yeah, I played the role, and some folks said successfully.

**Lein Walseth:** [Laughs] What elements of those previous productions have been woven into this one, and where do you think you have a different take on it now?

**Bellamy:** Well, it's a different world than it was then. There is an interesting parallel though, because Troy's career was at its height just before the major leagues were integrated, and here we are in a political and cultural moment just when a black man (Senator Obama) is positioned to break another barrier. We think we've arrived and that we're so much better than those that came before us, and then we see this piece, firmly ensconced in the 1950s, and every one of those issues is still relevant and meaningful today.

As far as the production, the woman who played Rose with me, Rebecca Rice, has now passed. I loved her, my God, I loved her. And so, I shaped this show so that I could see her onstage. So many of the things that she and I did show up in this production, and it's been lovely to see that those choices we made still stand up and work.

**Lein Walseth:** Since you've brought us back to Troy, I have to confess that watching the show, I literally wanted to get out of my seat, walk up onstage and punch him.

**Bellamy:** I know.

**Lein Walseth:** [Laughs] I don't know if that's what you were going for...

**Bellamy:** He's a tough case. During the time I was creating the role, myself, I hated him. Oh, Stephanie, I hated him. We'd sit and I'd bitch and moan and cry and just...I *hated* him, I *hate* men like that. Men who hold that kind of power over their the families, in this case over seventy six dollars and some cents. It's nothing. But then as I got in there and began to see how he was shaped and found those parts of me in the character—[ah] it was just *astounding*. He's more real, and there's more of him in us than we might want to admit. When I played the role, I had people from Austria, from Japan, from all over the world come up and just hug me and say, "That's my father. *That's my father.*" So, there is something captured there in that relationship between he and his son. And you see, he's trying to prepare him for the world that *he* [Troy] knew, not the world that *is*. The world that Cory must confront. And it's so sad, and Troy is so earnest, and he's so responsible about it and he's trying to make Cory strong. But what hurt me the most (when I was creating the role) was when Troy breaks that boy down...

**Lein Walseth:** Oh, that just *crushed* me.

**Bellamy:** ...just took everything away from him, just took it all away before our eyes, and called that preparation. He tells Cory he's going to take away his college education, and that he has to go get his job back at the A&P. [gasps, then laughs]

**Lein Walseth:** And you just see, in those moments, that generational conflict.

**Bellamy:** Oh yeah, but the preparation is honest and earnest, like I said. But, it's for a time that's gone. Troy can't see that. Again, we see the effect of racism. The way in which it moves from generation to generation.

**Lein Walseth:** I think one of the most interesting things about Troy is how he constructs different narratives about himself based on his present company. He tells so many different stories throughout this piece that you really get to see the different sides of his psyche and personality. When he's holding his new baby and he begins to tell his story to a fresh, innocent being...I was really blown away. Talk about history writing itself— in those moments you can clearly see that he is writing history as he wants it to be.

**Bellamy:** This is a perfect example of the way Wilson's work monumentally transforms from the page and the stage. You are not ready for that guy to fill up this theatre. You think you are, 'cause you read it, [both laugh] but you're not ready for the immenseness of the character.

**Lein Walseth:** And in this space you feel like you're in the backyard with...

**Bellamy:** Or right across the street...

**Lein Walseth:** ... yeah, just talking with the characters, and I think that just drives it home. I think there's something, an intimacy that you can't get anywhere else but this space, you know? It's really powerful. And so, just as Troy is a tremendously difficult role, I think Rose has an equally difficult battle.

**Bellamy:** I think so, and I wanted her to be his equal. I didn't want him to dominate her. She stands up to him, you know, when they have the fight, she's fighting back. She only loses because she's not *physically* able to match him.

But she brings baggage to her relationship with Troy as well, and she faces up to it. She said that she "wanted a house to sing in," and that she knew what she was doing. It surprised her, when she mixed up all the pieces of his life and hers, how he dominated her. But she said, "I saw that happening and I grabbed it. I grabbed it with both hands because this was my chance."

I love when he admits he's going to be a daddy, and she starts out, she takes it, and then I directed her to sit down when she couldn't stand any longer. He just [snap] nails her with that and she goes, "Oh, my God." She's got to sit there. And then she launches into, "You know I never wanted any of this. In my family it's always your daddy and your daddy and my daddy, and nobody can all sit down together, and oh, my God." And then she gathers herself and she rises up out of that moment. She comes at him because she's got that in her, that kind of power.

She's also representative of the black women that I know, with their supportive and eternal depth of love. Even though this man has hurt her beyond what someone should be expected to endure, she does not try to poison those children against him. When Cory comes in she finds the strength to let him be a man without hating his father. (You might notice that I did the same blocking for him when he told her as when Troy told her. She's going in the door, he's right by the gate, and he turns and he says, "Mama, I got something to tell you," just like his daddy did.

She's in those same places with these two men.) And she's raising this girl and she says, "If God gives me the strength, I'm going to do him just like your father did you" (oh...I'm going to cry) "I'm going to try and give her the best that's in me." What's better?

**Lein Walseth:** Mm hmm.

**Bellamy:** Yeah, I think that she's a real strong chick. [Laughs]

**Lein Walseth:** Absolutely.

**Bellamy:** I've heard folks say that August writes these women that are always in aprons. Well, yeah, she was, but that wasn't *Leave it to Beaver* up there. And it's the same time frame, the same topoi.

**Lein Walseth:** That's a definite distinction. Ok, now that you've some tears going, we've gotta mix in the laughter, which you always try to do in your productions, right? I noticed that in this piece this juxtaposition happens pretty frequently – there will be a moment of deep, abiding sadness and then right on top of that comes another moment, like when Rose says what she does about "your daddy and my daddy..." [both laugh], and the whole audience just cracks up. And in that moment you're saying to yourself, "I don't think I should be laughing!" But, you have to laugh because you need a release! It happens through Gabe too, in those moments when the tension is so thick you could cut it with a knife. In he comes and just splits it right open.

**Bellamy:** Still, you're *held* there. You want that resolution so badly...

**Lein Walseth:** Yeah, yeah...

**Bellamy:** ...and Gabe's in there being a fool! The same thing happens in *The Piano Lesson* when Wining Boy enters exactly at one of those spots. Berniece and Boy Willie are getting ready to shoot each other and he comes in...

**Lein Walseth:** I know, exactly! I was thinking while watching it, "This is a Wining Boy moment!"

**Bellamy:** It's a wonderful technique and I've learned, in working so much on August's texts, how to do it in other plays. It works. And people love it. I love it, you know, to laugh through tears. It's beautiful.

**Lein Walseth:** The question that most people ask me, when they know I'm working on Wilson's 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cycle, is, "What are the differences in these plays?" And, to some extent, I think the more interesting question is, "How does each of these plays animate the living legacy of slavery in the different decades?" The more of his work that you see and read, the more you really begin to see the similarities...

**Bellamy:** ...you sure do.

**Lein Walseth:**...and you see these touchpoints that he always includes: the food, you know, there's always mention of specific foods, and place names, and that south to north migration, and music, and gender conflict, and all sorts of common threads that weave through...

**Bellamy:** Yeah, oh yeah. And the repository of knowledge shaped from generation to generation through stories and storytelling.

**Lein Walseth:** Also, I think we have to mention the supernatural element in this piece, which also shows up in so much of Wilson's work. In *The Piano Lesson*, we have the ghost of Sutter, In *Gem of the Ocean* we have the City of Bones that gets created onstage, and in this piece we have the hellhounds that chase Gabe and Death that Troy has to wrestle with. So, what do you make of this? And how do you work to convey those concepts of the supernatural in production?

**Bellamy:** For the African American consciousness, that isn't a big step. [laughs] It's always there. I mean, I think it's there for the African, I *know* it's there for the African American. My grandmother would *see* things and *do* things. She came into the house one time from emptying trash there at 1119 Sherburne, and she said, "Oh my God, someone's going to die in the family." She said that something had tugged at her dress while she was emptying trash and she said, "Every time that happens, somebody dies." Well, bless Jesus, someone *did* die in the family. So, it's always there. There's some sort of paranormal, sympathetic magic that is possible.

I remember I brought home a girlfriend once, and nobody in the house liked her, and as I was going out, I looked back and grandma was throwing salt at the door so she wouldn't come back.

[Both laugh] I mean, it's just a part of who you *are*, so it isn't a big step for that kind of stuff to go down.

I had to massage it a little in *The Piano Lesson*. I had that train motif coming through there, so that you could think, "Okay, this ghost thing is the train, maybe, and that's what's shaking the house." But, in this one, he gives you another reason for Death being present: he always shows up when Troy's in a weakened state. The first time is when he was in the hospital and Rose said he was laying there with a fever, "talkin plum out of his head, "talkin 'bout Death and all that and how he wrestled with him." So, when you get Troy weakened, that's when this, this *thing* shows up. I think it shows up for all of us in those states. Have you ever been sick, Stephanie, I mean like really sick?

**Lein Walseth:** When I was younger, yeah.

**Bellamy:** It's a little different, the world and your place in it and so forth. I think that's what he's getting at.

So, in terms of the production, we conveyed Death through a light downstage. I made the choice to have him in the center, though, and to separate his swing of the bat at the end with that light source, because I didn't want it to be a direct, physical connection. I wanted it still kind of in his head, so that the audience wonders, "Is this real? Is he seeing it?"

**Lein Walseth:** So, to return to the beginning of our conversation, what do you hope audiences will walk away from this production with, given our current moment with Barack Obama's run for the presidency? Given that the world has changed since you last mounted this play, what do you think will resonate with them?

**Bellamy:** I think one of the things is the terrible conditioning and shaping that is done by that kind of injustice. It's the injustice that has shaped the Maxon family. And you can see how it just goes on and on. It's just such a terrible loss. We have now, perhaps, an opportunity to do something about that, to get some different views and people sitting at the table instead of the same old guys sitting there, making the same old damn decisions. You know? And maybe we can begin to turn that around. So perhaps they'll leave with an understanding of the way their choices shape other people's lives. That would be *really cool*.

**Lein Walseth:** Great, thank you so much.

**Bellamy:** Thank you, Stephanie.

## DESIGN STATEMENTS

The creative design team is responsible for making the text on the page into a literal reality onstage. By using sound, lighting, set and costumes elements, the designers create an atmosphere inside which the actors play. Designers use methods such as color, temperature, or volume to help them as they work. Each of these methods can create a feeling onstage based on which tools the designer chooses to use.

In production, the design elements come together with the text, the actors and the direction, to create a three dimensional world. Penumbra Theatre is guided by an ensemble aesthetic, which means that no element is more important than another. This is Penumbra's ethical approach to art, in which every voice is unique, necessary and communally rooted. This approach also creates artistic balance and excellence. The audience often does not realize that any of the elements were at one time separate. They are totally bound; the result is something greater than the sum of each of its parts. Patrons of Penumbra Theatre Company often say the work looks effortless because the end result feels magical, feels surreal. This is one way the creative team, including the director, designers, cast and crew, can evaluate the success of their endeavor.

It is not magic, though. A lot of work goes into creating a production. Here you can read about the intent of the designers, how they arrived at their concepts and what challenges and methods they used to make their part of the play come to life. (For information on production internships, please visit our website at [www.penumbrateatre.org](http://www.penumbrateatre.org), or call 651-288-6791)

## SCENE DESIGN LANCE BROCKMAN

All of the action for August Wilson's *Fences* takes place in the backyard of a row house in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The yard is filled with the history of this house that was probably built right after the turn of the century. Many of the buildings in this African-American section of the city were built from indigenous materials such as brick facades with limestone foundations. What characterizes most of the homes is that they were built adjacent to the sidewalks with little front yard and very close to each other and in many instances, sharing a common wall between units. Therefore, the backyard became space for escape from the heat of the house during the summer and for family interaction.

Many of the stage settings for this popular play, place the house and porch of Troy and Rose Maxon directly facing the audience. To achieve a sense of distance and to create a sense of the terrain of the Hill District, the house in our production is placed diagonally on the stage leading the audience visually to the historic photograph that shows a view over the tops of many of the roofs in the Hill District across the river to downtown

Pittsburgh. As a point of interest, the house represented upstage or behind the Maxson's is done in a reduced scale (i.e. the doors and windows are proportionately scaled down in size) so that the neighbor's house appears more distant while helping lead the eye to the photographic backdrop.

It has always been my desire to design a play by August Wilson as he creates such rich characters filled with great energy and in most instances, hope. With such well defined characters, the scenic designer's primary job is to provide a logical environment that allows the interaction of the characters to just plausibly occur. As a bonus, it is also my great pleasure to work with Lou Bellamy--the director on this production. He not only played the role of Troy Maxon himself, but also provides for me as the designer, great insights to both these rich characters and to life for the African-American community in Pittsburgh in the 1950s.

## **SOUND/MEDIA DESIGN**

### **MARTIN GWINUP**

One of designer's main goals is to support the intent and vision as laid out by the playwright and director while bringing their own artistic contributions to the production. Sometimes this can be a very complex task and at other times fairly simple. However in my experience it is always a challenge. As the sound designer for the production I need to support the story and intent of the production while not taking away from the performance or distracting the audience. Quite often the best sound design is the one where the audience is not aware of the sound after the performance but would be aware of its absence if it wasn't there. *Fences* has a very powerful story to tell using strong fascinating characters. The sound design will support this through environmental effects to help fill in location and time period. There will also be some effects to help support the more expressionistic moments when Troy is talking about "death" and to help support Gabe's special world. There will also be music to help with the transitions from scene to scene and to help portray time passing. It will also be used to help support the culture, passion, and emotion of the characters involved. *Fences* is not a play about sound but I hope to support the rest of the artists and technicians in the telling of the story.

## **LIGHTING DESIGN**

### **DON DARNUTZER**

The lighting for *Fences* helps support the vision of the director and setting created by the set designer and costume designer. The lighting follows the emotional arc of the play by use of color, intensity or brightness and direction of the lighting. My job also sets the time of year, day or night, any atmospheric effects or special effects that the script might have call for. Sometimes the playwright may not have specified the lighting for a scene for the show. So I collaborate with the director and the other designers in defining what our concept of the script will be and what the lighting needs will be for the production. I have done some scripts more than once with different results each time I design it. Every

director has his/her own concept of that play and what the requirements that are needed for the lighting design.

My job in some ways is like the cameraman and film editor when they create a film. The lighting designer directs the audience's focus during the performance to the most important part of the stage at any time to help tell the story, much like the film editor does when "cutting" the film. The audience may be or not, aware the hundreds of lighting changes taking place during the performance.

## **COSTUME DESIGN**

### **MATTHEW J. LEFEBVRE**

The challenge in designing the costumes for *Fences* stems from the epic nature of this very human play. This is an epic play. An intimidating play. The characters are simultaneously epic characters living very real lives in a very real existence in the 1950s in Pittsburgh. I've heard Lou Bellamy compare this play to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The challenge for the design is to honor the epic nature of these characters and their struggle, while maintaining a sense of believability by coming up with clothes that are rational extensions of the characters. I find great inspiration in photography of the period, especially the photography of Teeny Harris who documented daily life in Pittsburgh (including the Hill district) at the time the play was written. These photos are great documentation of what kind of clothing people wore at this time, but it is far more than simply a guide to texture, pattern, and scale. The photos show the attitudes of the characters and how these attitudes are reflected through the clothing and how it was worn.

As a costume designer, I couldn't help but notice how a theme of "uniforms" runs through this play on an almost subliminal level. Troy was an extremely gifted baseball player in the Negro Leagues, but racism and segregation denied him the success and recognition he could have achieved. Troy's son Cory has the potential to be a very successful pro football player. Sports figures wear uniforms that are on one level utilitarian, but on another, they are symbolic: the Gladiator, the Warrior, and the Champion. Although we never see Troy's uniform, we get the sense he was all this and more. We do get a glimpse of Cory's football uniform, but it isn't presented in its full glory. This is done to reinforce Troy's desire to keep Cory in his place. Cory's football uniform is replaced at the end of the play with another uniform, that of a sergeant in the USMC.

There are other variations of uniforms in the play. Troy and Bono as sanitation workers wear utilitarian gear that reflects the work they do. Rose wears the 1950's housewife equivalent of a uniform: cotton dresses and aprons which are this strange combination of utilitarian femininity. Rose never stops working. Every scene in this play she is either doing laundry, cooking, darning socks, and countless other chores to keep the household running. For her costumes, I relied heavily on vintage clothes from the 1950s. You obviously can't beat them for period authenticity, but more than that, they have the lived-in, workhorse quality these clothes need to have.

Lyons, Troy's other son from a previous marriage also wears a uniform of sorts. He fancies himself a jazz musician, but there are implications that his musical talents are not nearly as impressive as the athletic abilities of either Troy or Cory. To overcompensate for that shortcoming, he overdresses the part of the jazz musician.

The two uniforms that we never see in the play are the two that have the greatest symbolic power for the actions of the play: Troy's baseball uniform, and Gabriel's military uniform. There is a sense of mystique conjured up when characters in the play talk about Troy's talent on the ball field. His athletic prowess is allowed to manifest itself in the mind of the audience precisely because we never actually see a representation of how he looked in uniform. The juxtaposition of the greatness of that mental-image, with the humble, utilitarian reality of man in garbage-soaked clothes is a powerful image that propels the action of the play, and is a constant reminder to Troy, as well as the audience of what could/should have been.

Although we also don't see Gabriel's uniform in the play, I thought it was important to have a couple of remaining elements of the uniform such as combat boots and dog-tags mixed with civilian clothing. Gabriel's military uniform is significant not only because his diminished condition is a result of being wounded in action, but it also serves as foreshadowing of a very possible similar fate for Cory in Vietnam.

## TOOLS FOR TEACHING

The following are a series of questions you may use to prompt discussion, critical analysis or dialogue about this play. They may be used either before or after the play, either to guide audiences toward specific issues as they watch or, to stimulate conversation about topical issues afterward.

Penumbra Theatre Company now offers Lesson Plans that use the script, the production, and the study guide to investigate specific themes! Developed by high school teachers and curriculum consultants Kimberly Colbert and Kaye Peters, these questions are intended to meet the state standards for High School Language Arts and Literacy set by the Board of Education. (Grades 9 through 12). Each plan can run from approximately 15 to 45 minutes for discussion. Please contact Penumbra Theatre's Education Director for more details: [sarah.bellamy@penumbratheatre.org](mailto:sarah.bellamy@penumbratheatre.org)

## A Guide for Teaching August Wilson's *Fences*

### Overview

This guide provides a broad framework in which teachers may anchor their own classroom practice. For easy reference, lessons have been divided into five strands (mythology, literary study, themes, art and historical context). Teachers may choose to follow one strand for the unit or weave together elements and/or lessons from the various strands. A broad essential question for the entire *Fences* unit is suggested, as well as more specific essential questions aligned with strands (highlighted below). The essential question provides a foundation for study, with guiding questions for study imbedded in each lesson which will allow for a range of critical thinking and analysis within both English/language arts and social studies content areas. Anchor, or suggested, lessons are provided for each strand along with resource readings and classroom tools we have found effective in our own classrooms.

The suggested lessons are designed to meet high-school level Minnesota Reading and Literature and Writing standards and Minnesota Social Studies standards for Institutions and Traditions in Society. The standards are noted by the possible lessons in boldface type. Numbers and letters refer to the specific standard.

**LA** – is Language Arts standards

**SS** – is Social Studies standards

Both the *Contemporary Literary Criticism* printed by Gale Group and offered as an online database and *The Cambridge Companion to August Wilson*, edited by Christopher Bigsby, are valuable resources on Wilson's body of work and are cited in the commentary and essays that follow.

## Teaching the Play

### **Unit Essential Question:**

How does one define one's self within the larger expectations of society?

### **Mythology Essential Question:**

How do the mythologies used by Wilson in *Fences* help to inform and codify the African American experience?

### **Literary Study Essential Question:**

What literary aspects in *Fences* make it both a particularly African American and universal work of art?

### **Theme(s) Essential Questions:**

**Responsibility:** What is our responsibility to ourselves vs. families and society?

**African American identity:** What are the effects of institutionalized racism on Americans of African descent who try to define themselves in a society where they receive little or no positive support?

### **Art and Arts Literacy Essential Question:**

How does art help us to see and understand ourselves and the role we play in shaping society? (Lens of art creation and performance)

### **Important Vocabulary Words**

### Suggested Summative Assessments for Each Section

1. The **guiding questions** associated with each strand provide good essay questions for a final unit assessment.
2. Students could present a scene from the play with an analysis of the scene and support for their interpretation of the scene and its significance. Presentation could be assessed on how well they supported their interpretation.
3. Research paper on the myths alluded to within the play.
4. Passage analysis.

## Mythology

### **Essential Question: How do the mythologies used by Wilson in *Fences* help to inform and codify the African American experience?**

“August Wilson has often been described as a dramatic historian because of his quest to document the experiences of African Americans in the twentieth century. In truth, though, he is no more a historian than Shakespeare. . . . He had altogether a different version of history in mind, one which sank its roots in mythology. It is there that he looked for the symbols, metaphors and tales that embodied and expressed the hopes, fears, aspirations, and religious and civic yearnings of communities who laid down their true history in legends, poems, songs, prayers and, in Wilson's hands, plays.

Wilson was alive to, and tapped into, African myths, often codified in music. He was a storyteller recounting the history of his people but, as he was aware, he was not alone in that. In some senses he played the role performed by the griot in West Africa whose function it was and is to recount the history of his tribe and thereby to preserve and celebrate it. In an African context history is deeply implicated in storytelling, song and myth.

Wilson was in this tradition. Devoid of their mythological dimensions, his characters, Levee [*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, 1920s], Troy [*Fences*, 1950s] and Boy Willie [*The Piano Lesson*, 1930s], in their separate plays, are merely destructive forces at odds with their world instead of agents of change challenging the status quo and reordering their universe.” (Pereira 65)

By his own account, Wilson's play cycle for each decade of the Twentieth Century *Fences* was intended to forge out of the African American experience a mythology that would both codify that experience and act as a catalyst for examination and growth beyond it. In doing so, Wilson follows a long tradition of not just the African griot but also classical Greek theater. As an objective, Greek playwrights such as Aeschylus and Sophocles crafted plays to show their fellow citizens human weakness and potential for growth. Like Wilson, they grounded their plays in their culture's myths.

In *Fences*, Wilson weaves together allusions to African, Greek and American myths (particularly myths associated with baseball) that infuse the story of Troy Maxon to transcend, as Pereira notes, the story of a garbage collector who lives in Pittsburgh, drinks on Friday nights and cheats on his wife. In Wilson's hands, Troy joins that pantheon of mythological figures with whom his name pointedly places him: the mythic hero.

Therefore, the mythic hero is the focus for the suggested lesson for this strand. Other myth-related lessons could focus on topics such as:

- Myth vs. History: What is the difference between the myths of Sundiata, King of Old Mali, or the Trojan War versus the histories upon which the myths are based? This draws a contrast between the documentable events of history and the literature that makes those events meaningful. Why are myths important? **(SS: Peoples and Cultures. LA: I.C. 1, 2, 4, 7, 10 and I.D. 3, 11, 12, 14)**
- How do Greek, African and American baseball myths inform and develop Wilson's play? Wilson includes multiple allusions to Greek myths (character names, the hubris Troy exhibits in challenging Death, the storytelling structure present in Homer's *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, the allusion to Oedipus in Troy's blindness after he fights his father). The storytelling also closely links Troy to the

griots of African culture who were the keepers of African history and mythology, as well as the Yoruba trickster hero Eshu. Finally, Wilson uses the mythology of baseball (concepts of fair play and meritocracy that make the game “all-American,” mythic players such as Jackie Robinson and Babe Ruth) to challenge the fairness of Troy’s fate.

**(SS: Peoples and Cultures. LA: I.D. 3, 11, 12, 14)**

**A compendium of resources for these alternative studies is listed at the end of this strand.**

## Troy Maxon and the Mythic Hero Archetype

Sample Lesson: 2-4 Days

**LA Standards:** As noted below

**SS (Peoples and Cultures) Standards:**

- Identifying societal concepts that influence the interaction among individuals, groups, and institutions in society.

**Guiding questions:**

1. What is the significance of Troy's name?
2. What are the essential characteristics that define the mythic hero?
3. How are those characteristics present or not present within Troy?
4. What literary elements or structures help to develop Troy as a mythic hero?
5. How does Troy, as a mythic hero, develop meaning within the play?
6. How does Troy, as a mythic hero, help the audience's understanding of the experience of African Americans?
7. If Troy is a mythic hero, what contribution or sacrifice has he made for his society?
8. Is Troy a mythic hero or is he a tragic hero (a mythic hero with a fatal flaw)?

**Preparatory Set: LA Standards I. A and B.1-2**

This lesson is devised to be taught after reading *Fences*, but it could be broken in two with the preparatory set (study of mythical heroes) preceding reading or attending the play. The main lesson then could follow attending or reading the play. Study of the hero's journey before the play would give students markers to look for as they see or study the play itself.

- Students should be familiar with the characteristics of the **mythic hero**, as opposed to a **folk hero** such as Johnny Appleseed. Very specific characteristics mark the mythic hero. They are illustrated below in the **hero's journey**:
  1. Mythology scholar Joseph Campbell defines a hero this way: "A hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than oneself." The hero embarks on a journey where he matures as a hero. In an interview with Bill Moyers he adds, "The usual hero adventure begins with someone from whom something has been taken, or who feels there's something lacking in the normal experiences available or permitted to the members of his society," (Campbell, 152). Campbell adds that the hero is human and, therefore, has weaknesses.
  2. The hero is often reluctant and encouraged to undertake his adventure.
  3. The hero has friends or mentors who help him/her.
  4. The mythic hero has special tools or powers that elevate her/him beyond other humans.
  5. The hero is put through tests or trials to strengthen him or her for battle.
  6. The hero endures the supreme ordeal.
  7. There is an apotheosis where the hero's best qualities come together.
  8. The hero is resurrected and/or transformed by his/her experience.

- Sample mythical heroes could be assigned for students to research or the teacher could present hero stories to the students: Hercules, Odysseus, Achilles, Hector, Sundiata (Mali), Thor, Gilgamesh (Mesopotamia) and many more. Information could be presented in paper or oral report. **See sources at end of this lesson.**  
**(LA: I.D.3, 12; II.D.1, 10, 11)**
- Student/modern hero stories. Students may create their own hero stories from their lives or lives of their contemporary heroes. How do the characteristics of the mythic hero in 1-8 above correlate to these modern stories? (Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Helen Keller are examples of modern figures who have been portrayed as heroes as defined above.)  
**(LA II.A)**

**Materials:**

Large paper for students to make charts to share

Colored markers

Tape or thumb tacks for posting charts

Copies of *Fences* (at least one per group)

**Lesson Outline:**

1. Begin with a class discussion of whether Troy embodies the characteristics of a hero. Focus on first impressions. What are his strengths and weaknesses? Teachers may wish to refer to the **guiding questions** for discussion. Students should draw on earlier mythologies and text to support their ideas.  
**(LA I. D. 1, 4, 14)**
2. Next, review the **hero's journey** and list on board for reference.
3. Directions for assignment: **LA: I.D. 1, 5, 6, 10, 12**
  - a. Divide students into groups. Students will need to remember their groups. Each group will need markers and paper to chart Troy's journey (may use exposition as well as play action), using the hero's journey for guidance. If he does not fit criteria, mark the step but ask students to leave it blank on their papers.
  - b. Each group will select a facilitator to ensure that everyone is heard and participates. Facilitators will evaluate group at end.
  - c. All steps of Troy's journey must make specific references to text with act and page numbers cited. (E.g. Act I, Scene 3; pages 36-37).
4. Once in groups, students should take 30 minutes to chart Troy's journey.
5. Post charts on walls for review by all groups.
6. Chalk Talk (this review may be scheduled for the following day if necessary)
  - a. In their assigned groups, students will look at other charts and take turns writing comments for the group on each chart. Caution that students need to be respectful and ask questions or make comments that raise points for discussion.

- b. Once groups have commented on all other charts, they should stay at the last chart (not their own).
  - c. Representatives of last group will read the comments aloud so all students hear the comments made on each group's chart.
7. Use students' comments to build discussion about whether Troy fits the profile of a mythic hero. Students should take notes during discussion, which can be framed around one or more of the **guiding questions** listed above. These questions can also be used for an essay as an end-of-unit assessment.

**Reflection on unit and essential questions: (LA II.A.3)**

Students journal on what they have learned about how we define ourselves in society and how myths help us to understand ourselves and society. Conclude with a final discussion pulling the elements of the mythic hero and Troy's experience together in response to these essential questions:

1. Does Troy embody the characteristics of the mythic hero?
2. What has he sacrificed and what has he brought to his people?
3. How does Troy help the audience understand the African American experience?
4. How does *Fences* parallel mythologies students know?
5. In the tradition of mythology, what does Troy's experience offer African Americans in terms of guidance for the future?
6. How does Troy's experience help students understand how one defines one's self within the larger expectations of society?

**NOTE:** These questions can also be used for an essay as an end-of-unit assessment.

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Westbrook, Deanne. *Ground Rules: Baseball & Myth*. Champaign IL: University of Illinois Press, 1996.

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Sophocles. *Sophocles: The Oedipus Cycle*. Trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Harcourt, 1977.

## Literary Study

### **Essential Question: What literary aspects in *Fences* make it both a particularly African American and universal work of art?**

From the distinctive idioms and speech patterns of his characters that link them to the African American community to the larger symbols and metaphors that transcend any one group's identity, Wilson has fashioned a play that has appealed to audiences around the world. The play is full of potent features for literary study such as:

- How does Wilson tell his story? How is the oral tradition present within *Fences* and what is its effect? Here, comparisons could be drawn to the griots of Africa and the Greeks' Homer, both as they are present in Troy and the story the playwright himself is presenting. Griots or other cultural story tellers kept alive history before pen and paper were available or, in the case of African slaves or other oppressed peoples, when pen and paper were forbidden. Look at the oral tradition and consider how the tradition is present in the play. **(LA I.D.9, 10)**
- How does the set of the play affect its meaning? Students could explore the significance of the play being set in the Maxon's backyard **(LA I.D.6, 9)** and the props such as the rag ball and ball **(LA I.D.6, 9)**, and the symbolism of the fence **(LA I.D.5)**. Other elements of setting (time of day, entrances and exits, the alley) could also be examined.
- Conflict study: what is each of the main character's primary conflict? Review types of conflict: person v. self, person v. person, person v. society, person v. nature, person v. fate/God. Students will then describe each character's main type of conflict and support with five examples for each character in a journal. How does the conflict for each character develop that character? The play? **(LA I.D. 1, 6, 9, 10)**
- How is the play divided by acts and scenes and what is the effect in developing the play? **(LA I.D. 9, 10, 14)**
- How does Wilson's choice of language spoken by the characters help to develop the play (characterization, tone, rhythm, mood)? **(LA I.B.2 and I.D.1, 4, 14)** This requires students to look up unfamiliar words and consider the effects of idiom and register. Wilson wrestled with whether to use black English in his earlier plays. What is its effect here? How does it help to develop the play and the characters' voices?
- Where are Troy's stories in the play and what are their effects in the context of their placement? **(LA I.D.1, 10)**
- What is the significance of character names within the play?
- What role does Gabriel play in the development of the play and its meaning?

- What does it mean to have a “full count”? The metaphorical implications of baseball terminology and metaphors (**LA I.D 5**)
- Passage analysis: Personification

Personification is a term that ascribes human qualities to things that are not human, such as objects, feelings and concepts. Analyze the passage below for the effect of personification. What just happened to Troy? Why does he pick up the bat and assume a batting posture? What is the effect of his addressing Death as a person? What is the significance of the scene happening outside the fence?

TROY: I can't taste nothing. Helluljah! I can't taste nothing no more.

*(TROY assumes a batting posture and begins to taunt Death, the fastball in the outside corner.)*

Come on! It's between you and me now! Come on! Anytime you want! Come on! I be ready for you . . . but I ain't gonna be easy.”

*(The lights go down on the scene.)*

## Home and Fences: The Duality of Baseball Metaphors in *Fences*

Sample Lesson: 4 Days

**LA Standards:** I.B.2 (vocabulary expansion) and I.D.5 (figurative language).

Many literary devices add to the richness of *Fences*, but none perhaps more prominently than the allusions and metaphors grounded in baseball. Troy, who played in the Negro League, speaks in baseball metaphor and is bitter that he was not allowed to play in the major leagues. His experience with the sport and being barred because of race from the majors is a clear aspect of his character's identity. He is the "darker brother," the contrast to the myths surrounding the sport.

"The game of baseball has long been regarded as a metaphor for the American dream--an expression of hope, democratic values, and the drive for individual success. According to John Thorn, baseball has become 'the great repository of national ideals, the symbol of all that [is] good in American life: fair play (sportsmanship); the rule of law (objective arbitration of disputes); equal opportunity (each side has its innings); the brotherhood of man (bleacher harmony); and more'" (Koprince). Yet, Troy Maxon found baseball to be anything but fair. The metaphors then take on a certain irony in Wilson's *Fences*. Two particular metaphors are pregnant with meaning: home and fences. They are the focus of the sample lesson in metaphor for this strand.

Whether students are in ninth grade and just beginning to work with metaphor or are seniors with experience in deconstructing metaphors, looking at the metaphors of "home" and "fences" within *Fences* will provide a valuable lesson in the duality a metaphor can present and its effect on meaning within literature.

**This lesson takes 4 days (2 days following act 1 and 1-2 days at the end of play).**

### Guiding Questions:

1. What is a metaphor?
2. What is a "home?"
3. In baseball terminology, what is "home" and its significance to the game?
4. What does it mean to be "safe at home?" What is a "home run?"
5. What is "home" to Troy Maxon?
6. What is a "fence"?
7. In baseball terminology, what are the "fences?" How are they important to the game? (see vocabulary section of the guide)
8. What is the significance of "fences" in this play?
9. How do these baseball terms of "home" and "fences" develop concepts within the play?
10. How do they heighten the audience's awareness of Troy Maxon's fate as an African American man?

### Preparatory Set (Days 1-2):

Within context of studying Act I of the play, engage in a short classroom discussion on the student's connotations of the terms "home" and "fences." Provide overview of following lesson. To understand the implications of a metaphor, start with the denotative meaning.

**Materials:**

- Dictionaries (at least one per group)
- Copies of *Fences* (at least one per group)
- Notebook paper and writing utensils for each student

**Possible Lesson Outline:**

1. Set up expert groups. To look at first the denotative and then the connotative meaning of these words, set up groups for a jigsaw as follows. The first “expert” groups will be a little large, but this arrangement will allow for smaller groups in the more significant “teaching” groups. Everyone must take notes in both groups. It is critical that everyone take notes in expert groups because they will have to teach the material in the second part of the activity. Sample notes will be collected for teacher review and evaluation at the end of the activity.
  - First will be the expert groups. Each of four expert groups will be responsible for looking up the denotative meaning of the words “home” and “fences” as follows and brainstorming a web of literal ways in which the term is used:
    - Group 1:** Home in the common sense.
    - Group 2:** Home as it is used in baseball.
    - Group 3:** Fences in the common sense.
    - Group 4:** Fences in baseball.
  - Students will count off by 4, random selection. These will be the expert groups.
  - Students should move to areas of the room designated for their group.
2. Students will look up the words and create webs. Then they should look at the following list of references from the play and connect these references to ideas they already placed on the web or add to their webs.

<b>Home</b>		<b>Fences</b>	
p. 9	“home runs” (Bono)	p. 21	“Jesus be a fence” (Rose)
p. 34	“Hell, I can hit forty-three homeruns right now!” (Troy)	p. 24	“put up the fence” (Bono)
p. 40	“You all line up at the door with your hands out” (Troy)	p. 30	“you supposed to be putting up this fence” (Rose)
		p. 31	“help me with this fence” (Troy)

3. In expert groups, students discuss and take notes on how the meaning of these two concepts take on metaphorical significance in the context of the text.

4. Set up teaching groups: In teaching groups, students will share what they learned and discussed in their expert groups. Both groups who looked at “home” should present, followed by both “fences” groups.
  - Students will count off by the number of students that are in the smallest group. If there are extras in another group, they can be distributed among the reformed “teaching” groups. Relocated to designated area of room. **Students should write both their teaching and expert group numbers on their notes.**
5. Group presentations.
6. Group discussion. Drawing on their presentations, students will discuss and take notes on the following questions (write on board or overhead):
  - What does “home” mean to Troy?
  - How does the Maxson home relate to “home” in baseball?
  - What do you believe is the purpose of the fence Rose wants around the Maxson yard?
  - What is the objective of a hitter in baseball when he “hits for the fences”?
7. Select one person from each discussion group to turn in their notes, balancing between the four expert groups to get a representative sample. All students should keep notes.

**Preparatory set (Days 3-4):**

Refer students to their notes from **Days 1-2** and give students five minutes to review. Follow with short discussion on what they find significant about the concepts of “home” and “fences.”

**Lesson Outline:**

1. Students should return to their teaching groups and look at the following text from Act II. What are the metaphorical implications raised?
  - p. 60: Troy and Bono discuss building the fence and what material is needed.
  - p. 61: “I don’t see why Mama want a fence around the yard nowadays.” (Cory)
  - p. 61: “some people build fences to . . . keep people in.” (Bono)
  - p. 64: “I wanna see you put that fence up by yourself.” (Bono)
  - p. 68-9: “I can step out of this house . . .” (Troy)
  - p. 69: Troy’s baseball analogy explaining his attraction to Alberta. “safe” at home.
  - p. 70: “steal second” (Troy)
  - p. 77: “build me a fence” (Troy)
  - p. 79: “homeless” Troy brings Raynell home and begs Rose to take her in.

- p. 94: “He wasn’t satisfied hitting in the seats. . . he want to hit it over everything!” (Lyons speaking about Troy, his father, when he played baseball.)
- p. 95-6: Troy died swinging the bat as Rose was going into house. (Rose)

2. Metaphors can reveal the complexity or duality of a concept. Consider the dual meaning of “home” and “fences” in *Fences* and discuss the following questions:
- What Troy Maxon “safe at home”?
  - How does the restriction implied by the fence Troy builds around the Maxon house compare to his goal as a ballplayer?
  - How do these two metaphors develop your awareness of Troy Maxon’s fate as an African American man?

**Reflection:**

Students should write a short reflection, including how the metaphors helped them to understand Troy Maxon and the meaning of the play.

**Work Cited in Literary Study Strand**

Koprince, Susan. “Baseball as History and Myth in August Wilson’s *Fences*.”  
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## Themes: Responsibility

**Essential Question:** What is our responsibility to ourselves vs. families and society?

At the heart of *Fences* is a question that transcends race: “What does a man owe to his family, and how much can a man, . . . permit himself to ignore duty in order to pursue more self-interested objectives?” (Blumenthal). Troy Maxon, the protagonist of Wilson’s play, through his diction, repeatedly stresses the virtue of responsibility to his sons and wife. “I done learned my mistake and learned to do what’s right by it. You still trying to get something for nothing. Life don’t owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself,” he tells his oldest son, Lyons, early in the play (18; 1).

Yet Lyons, in his quest to be a musician, and Troy, through his philandering, show that responsibility is easier to talk about than uphold. In what could be the climax of the play, Troy squares off with his wife, Rose, after informing her that he has gotten another woman pregnant. In explaining why he slept with Alberta, he tells Rose “I done locked myself into a pattern trying to take care of you all that I forgot about myself” (69; 2).

As Blumenthal notes in her essay, the question of responsibility has more challenges when the individual is an African-American man in pre-Civil Rights America, but Troy and Rose’s debate over responsibility at the beginning of act 2 also has a universal dimension that begs the question of to whom and for whom we must be responsible.

The following lesson is designed for the end of the play to help students pull together concepts and themes within the play and support them with text.

### **Fish Bowl Discussion: To Whom Are We Most Responsible?**

Sample Lesson: 2 days

**LA Standards: I.D. 1, 13, 14.**

**SS (Peoples and Cultures) Standards:**

- A. Identifying societal concepts that influence the interaction among individuals, groups, and institutions in society.
- B. Examining tension between individuality and conformity.

### **Guiding Questions:**

1. What is our responsibility to ourselves?
2. What is a parents’ responsibility to his or her children?
3. What is a husband’s or wife’s responsibility to his or her spouse?
4. What is our responsibility to our community or society?
5. What do we do when these responsibilities are in conflict?

### **Preparatory Set:**

As noted above, this lesson is designed to fall at the end of the unit. Begin with a journal question for students: “To whom do we most owe responsibility? Ourselves, our family or our community?” Follow with informal discussion.

**Materials:**

Notepaper and writing utensils.

For day 2, room needs to be organized with four chairs at center, in a circle and facing each other.

Other chairs will be lined up behind the four chairs for supporting group members.

**Lesson Outline:****Day 1:**

1. Set up lesson: Students will debate the question posed for journal, using text from the play to support their arguments. The first day will be used for four groups (to reduce sizes of groups, break family into parents/children and husband/wife as in guiding questions) to find text to support their arguments in favor of self, child, spouse or society. The second day will be a fish bowl discussion where a representative from each group will argue the group's position and try to persuade the others, using specific text from the play to support their position. Other members of the same group may tag out the speaker (details below).
2. Students will vote with feet, moving to designated areas of room as to whether they think their greatest responsibility is to themselves, their children, their spouse or their society.
3. If group numbers are significantly uneven, teacher should adjust or, if very lopsided, teacher can randomly assign groups to argue a position whether they believe it or not. (Good practice for seeing an issue from another's perspective.)
4. Give students remainder of the hour to look up text together and build their argument. Everyone should take notes both in groups and during discussion (could collect at end, with reflection). Students should be encouraged to also review play on their own for homework.

**Day 2:**

1. Set up discussion: Speakers representing each group will sit in center four desks (the fish bowl). Each speaker must be allowed to talk at least once. Once they have spoken, however, a member of his/her group may tag them to take over the chair and speak. Speakers may return to the center. All speakers **MUST** cite the play in supporting their argument and everyone must listen and take notes. Points may be given for notes, with extra credit for speaking, or as teacher sees fit.
2. Give groups five minutes to review arguments and text and any additional information. Choose first speaker.
3. Fish bowl discussion, as set out in 1. 20-30 minutes.
4. Students will write a reflection summarizing their position, given what they have heard and citing how the play supports their final position. They may also reflect on how they arrived at their position.
5. Hand in reflections (notes optional) to teacher.

## Themes: African American Identity

**Essential Question:** What are the effects of institutionalized racism? What is institutionalized racism's legacy on the individual, families and society? On someone who is trying to define him/herself?

**Standards:** I.D.4, I.D.5, I.D.7, I.D.9, I.D.10, I.D.11, I.D.13, I.D.14

Several literary elements including setting, plot, and diction help to define the African American identity in August Wilson's *Fences*. Students will explore several devices in order to explore the way in which Wilson deals with the central idea of African American identity.

Racism is a common theme in August Wilson's plays chronicling the African American experience. (Political Science)

**Racism:** discrimination against a group of people based on their distinct physical characteristics and common ancestry.

**Institutionalized Racism:** racism that is codified through government or other societal structures either explicitly or implicitly.

### Guiding Questions:

1. What does the setting of the play suggest about the Maxon's place in society? Why?
2. What evidence of Jim Crow and institutionalized racism is present within the play?
3. What factors blocked Troy Maxon's opportunities to play professional baseball?
4. Why can Troy not drive a garbage truck?
5. What is the significance of Troy winning the right to drive a truck?
6. How do Troy's experiences affect his relationships with his family and friends?
7. Why does Troy oppose Cory playing football to get a college scholarship?
8. How are the larger effects of Troy's experiences with racism presented within the play?

### Examples of institutionalized racism in *Fences*:

- Baseball
- Garbage collection and driving
- Troy's put downs of his sons' ambitions
- Troy's desire to feel unstuck

### Textual Examples (for teacher)

- Wilson's introduction to the play.
- **Act I, Scene I;** conversation between Troy, Rose and Bono.

TROY: I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football. (p. 8)

- **Act I, Scene I;** conversation between Troy, Rose and Bono.

ROSE: Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. That was before the war. Times have changed a lot since then.

TROY: How in hell they done changed?

ROSE: They got lots of colored boys playing ball now. Baseball and football.

BONO: You right about that, Rose. Times have changed, Troy. You just come along too early.

TROY: There ought not never have been no time called too early! (p. 9)

- **Act I, Scene I.** Troy’s story about not being able to get credit to buy furniture. (p. 14-15)

- **Act I, Scene I.**

LYONS: Aw, Pop, you know I can’t find no decent job. Where am I gonna get a job at? You know I can’t get no job. . . . I don’t wanna be carrying nobody’s rubbish. (p. 17)

- **Act I, Scene I.**

TROY: I done learned my mistake and learned to do what’s right by it. You still trying to get something for nothing. Life don’t owe you nothing. You owe it to yourself. (p. 18)

### **Materials:**

Large sheets of paper, one for each guiding question.

Markers, one for each member of cooperative group.

### **“Chalk Talk” Discussion:**

1. Divide class into eight groups – one group for each guiding question.
2. Instruct students to discuss their guiding question on, marking answers and textual evidence on the large white paper.
3. Let them know the exercise will be timed.
4. After the allotted time, ask students to pass the paper to the next group.
5. Students should review the new question and answers and respond in writing to points that resonate with them by drawing a line from the comment to another part of the paper and writing their response.
6. Allow about six minutes for responses and have students pass their papers to the next group.
7. Continue to do this until each group receives their original paper again.
8. Briefly review guiding questions and answers.

*Note: (Chalk Talk is a strategy developed by Brown University’s Arts Literacy Project. More information can be found at [artslit.org](http://artslit.org), “Handbook” section.)*

**Seminar:** Students will discuss the **essential questions**. Questions should be assigned as written homework before the seminar is held.

**Procedures:** Set up the room in a way that allows students to have a large-group discussion as well as provide a place for those who come to class unprepared, to finish their work.

Check student's homework as they enter the room. Send students who come prepared to a place in the discussion circle. Others should take a seat in the other part of the classroom and finish their homework. They may join the circle when they are finished.

Review ground rules for seminar:

- no talking over the discussion
- no talking under the discussion (e.g. whispering) or having side conversations
- students should raise their hands to comment
- students should try to speak in full sentences and/or paragraphs (to practice communicating complete thoughts)
- students should refer to each other by name
- the teacher facilitates only when necessary; the discussion belongs to the students.

Begin the seminar by allowing each student in the circle to answer one of the questions. This way no one dominates and student who are more shy are forced to participate. You can open the discussion for further comments after the round robin has finished. At this point, the teacher steps in only to remind students of ground rules, ask for textual evidence or briefly jump-start silence. In general, however, students can be trusted to fill pregnant pauses.

When you begin the response part of the discussion, read the essential question and step back to let the students take over. Every once in awhile it might be necessary to call on people who are not responding to draw them into the discussion.

Continue to answer the questions throughout the class period. You might want to debrief the process or have kids respond to the process itself on paper before they leave.

### **Work Cited in Themes Section**

Blumenthal, Anna S. "'More stories Than the Devil Got Sinners': Troy's Stories in August Wilson's Fences." American Drama 9. No. 2. Spring 2002. 74-96. 28 June 2008.

<http://galenet.galegroup.com/servlet/GLD/hits>.

## Art and Arts Literacy

**Essential Question:** How does art help us to see and understand ourselves and the role we play in shaping society?

**Standards:** D4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14.

As an artist, August Wilson credits the influence of a number of artistic forms that helped him weave together his complex account of African American life. In this unit, students will explore some of the artistic forms that make up the warp and weft of Wilson's work. They will also study the role of the artist in addressing issues of identity and the way in which art shapes the world in which they live.

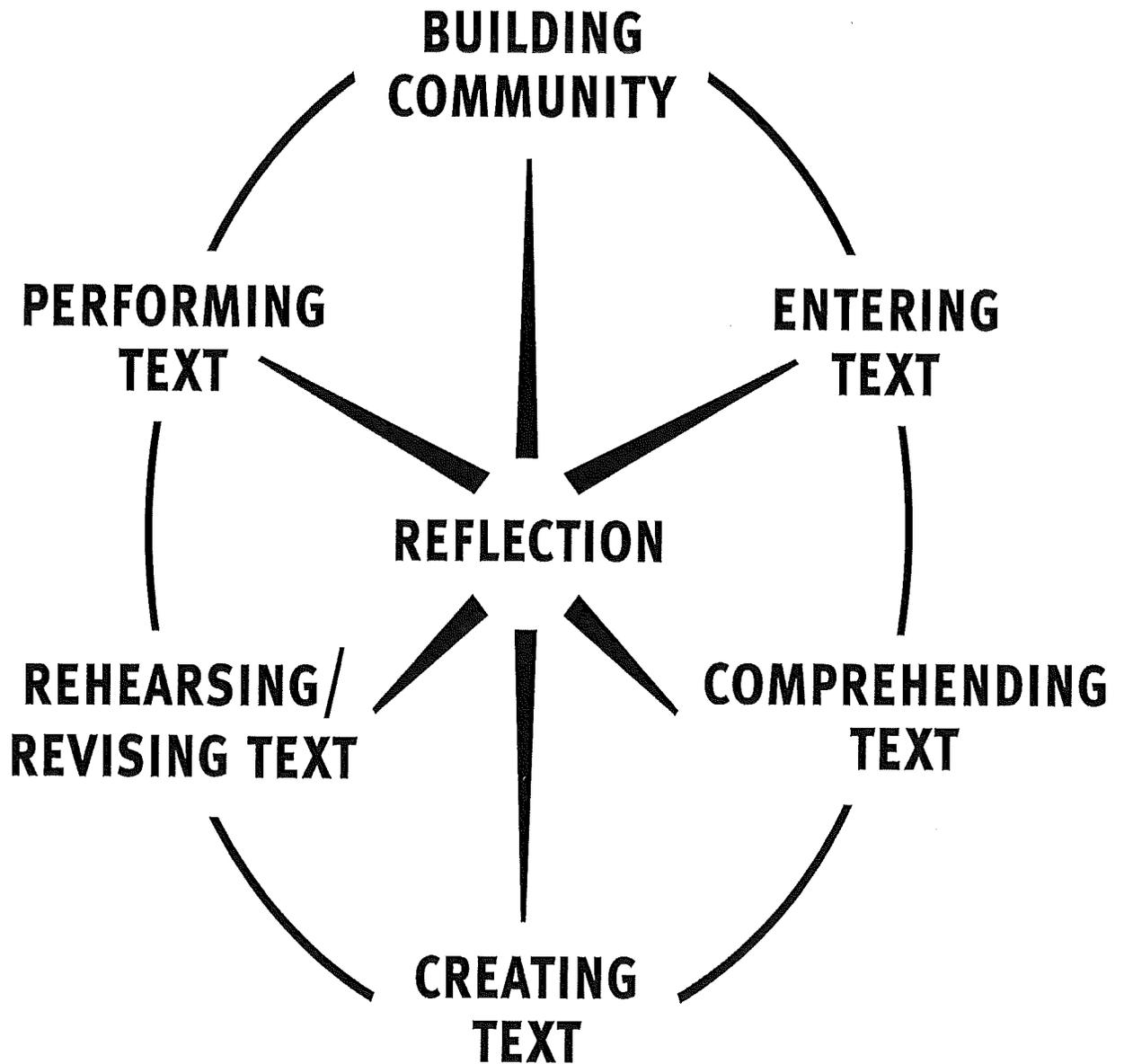
"I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters, and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of the men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth." (Elam, PAGE)

"There ought never have been no time called too early." (Troy Maxon, *Fences*, Act 1, Scene 1; p. 16)

*Note: Brown University's Arts Literacy Project developed methods for approaching literacy through the performing and visual arts. Arts Literacy provides a way to meaningfully incorporate the arts into lesson plans. The method is based on a cycle -- The Performance Cycle -- which allows students to encounter the text in a variety of ways. As students continue to study text using arts literacy they are brought deeper into words and meaning, while at the same time create their own art. At the center of the cycle is reflection, a time to think about not only what they have learned, but the way in which they have learned it. (For more details see "handbook" on [artslit.org](http://artslit.org))*



# The Performance Cycle



## Exercise: Community Building--Human Atom

- **Structure: investigating *Fences* through African American poetry.** This lesson can be used as a preparation to reading the play. For this activity the teacher should remain out of the activity on the side of the room.

### Materials:

Music

CD player

Copies of the following texts: (available at end of section)

DuBois, W.E.B. "My Country 'Tis of Thee."

Giovanni, Nikki. "Dreams."

Hughes, Langston. "I, Too."

Wilson, August. *Fences* excerpt Act I; Scene I

**Preparation:** Mapping out the various phrases you will use throughout this activity is important. Read through the text and think of different situations you can take the students through that give a feel for the characters and their dilemmas. Write down specific phrases from the text you can use after, "Walk as if you . . ." For instance, using a phrase from the poem, "Dreams" by Nikki Giovanni, you might say "Walk as if you grew and matured and became more sensible."

Also, develop a list of words that capture the essence of the play to create statues around. For *Fences* these words might include: **equality**, **oppression**, and **dream**. These words incorporate central ideas from both the play and the poetry. You also might find critical images and phrases from the texts for statues, such as "I am the darker brother," from Langston Hughes' poem "I, Too."

**Description:** Students walk around a space and inhabit different physicalities and emotions. There are many variations of this activity – some are designed to build community, and some to enter text. Often, teachers begin with the community-building variations to warm students up before starting to add in themes, characters, and quotes from the text. Thus, Human Atom can help you to achieve multiple purposes.

**Procedure:** The basic movement of this activity is simple. Students should walk around the space and keep the room balanced. Choose a point at the center of the room and point out that it is the "Nucleus." All of the students in the room are the "electrons;" they will walk around the center of the nucleus, walk to a far point in the room, back to the nucleus, and then back out to another far point in the room. If the room is large and there are only a few participants, delineate a smaller space with chairs or tape.

Another option for walking around the room is for participants to picture a shape in their head and to imagine that shape is taped onto the floor around the entire room. They can trace the shape as they walk throughout the room.

During the activity it is important that none of the students talk to each other or make physical contact unless instructed. Ask the students to move around the room in random patterns, they often want to move in a continuous circle.

Once the activity begins, teachers can mix any of the following activities:

**Freeze:** “When I say the word **freeze**, everyone in the room should freeze and not move any part of the body, including eyes and fingers.” This can be a good option to regain control of the activity or to use for transitions.

**Friendship:** “When I say the word **friendship**, everyone should introduce themselves to one another.” Try it also in slow motion and fast forward, with the participants introducing themselves to new people each time.

**Situations:** Walk the participants through situations related to the text, both physical and emotional. For instance from *Fences*: “You just had an argument with your father, who would rather you find a trade or some kind of work instead of going to college on a sports scholarship. Let your body show how you feel.”

**Statues:** “When I say a word, form a statue of that word.” Select words from the text. As the group forms statues, push them to make their statues “twice as big, now as big as you can make it,” to add levels to the room, to increase commitment or energy amongst the students.

**Reflection:** ([handbook.artslit.org](http://handbook.artslit.org))

1. Based on all of the experiences you had and the statues you created with words, what do you think this text might be about?
2. How did people interpret the text differently in their statues?
3. Which situation made you feel the best?
4. Which was the most painful?
5. Which words were the easiest to physicalize? Which were the most difficult?

**Exercise: Entering Text with Line Tableaus:** This serves as a warm-up to the comprehending text exercise.

- **Structure: investigating *Fences* through African American poetry.** This lesson can be used as a preparation to reading the play. For this activity the teacher should remain out of the activity on the side of the room.

**Procedure:** The basic movement of this activity is simple. Take one line from each text, such as the following:

“There ought not never have been a time called too early.”  
“I am the darker brother. They send me to each in the kitchen.”  
“black people aren’t suppose to dream”  
“My country ‘tis of thee, late land of slavery.”

As students walk in around the room, shout out a line. Students randomly join groups around the room to create a tableau. Or perhaps they might choose to create a large tableau. Coach them to being aware of physically connecting to others in the room in creative and individual ways: creating different body shapes, using different levels.

**Museum:** Allow a couple of people to leave each time a tableau is created to view the sculpture(s). Tell them that as long as they haven’t had the chance to observe they can look. Limit it to a few people each time. Others who remain in the tableaus should “fill in” the area where others have left.

**Reflection:** (handbook artslit.org)

1. Based on all of the experiences you had and the statues you created with words, what do you think this text might be about?
2. How did people interpret the text differently in their tableaus?
3. Which situation made you feel the best?
4. Which was the most painful?
5. Which words were the easiest to physicalize? Which were the most difficult?

## Exercise: Comprehending Text, Creating Text

- **Structure: investigating *Fences* through textual analysis and interpretation.** This lesson should be used after or while reading the play. For this activity the teacher should remain out of the activity on the side of the room.

**Procedure:** Form four groups.

Assign each group a poem or passage from the play.

Each group should read their passage and choose four lines they find to be significant.

The group should then narrow the list of lines to four by voting.

Students should create a tableau for each line. Each line should be recited by the group, using repetition, chorus, echo, sound and movement to enhance the visual.

After tableaus are created, students should create a performance piece, moving fluidly from one tableau to the next.

**Reflection:** (handbook artslit.org)

1. Based on all of the experiences you had and the statues you created with lines from the text, what do you think this play might be about?
2. How did people interpret the text differently in their tableaus?
3. Why and how did you select one line over another to interpret?
4. Did adding movement help you think differently about the plot? If so, how?
5. Which lines were the easiest to physicalize? Which were the most difficult?

## **Exercise: Rehearsing and Performing Text**

- **Structure: investigating *Fences* through textual analysis and interpretation.** This lesson should be used after reading the play. It may be used after students experience the **Comprehending Text, Creating Text Exercise**. For this activity the teacher should remain out of the activity on the side of the room.

**Procedure:** Have each group take a space in the room.

After a brief countdown, each group should run through their performance piece.

Instruct students to hold their final tableau for about 10 seconds and then sit down quietly until everyone finishes their rehearsal.

Circle performance: Run through each performance piece individually so that each group presents their performance. (To save time and keep the atmosphere comfortable, students should remain in their part of the room and simply direct their focus to the performers).

Instruct students to again hold their last tableau for 10 seconds and then sit quietly.

As one group sits, the next group moves into place for performance.

Hold all applause until the end.

## **Final Reflection**

With pen/pencil and paper, students should find a quiet space in the room. Choosing their favorite line from the original poem/excerpt. They should use the line as a prompt to write their own poem.

Students should reflect in writing on the guiding and essential questions: How does art help us to see and understand ourselves and the role we play in shaping society?

## Art and Arts Literacy

**Essential Question: How does art help us to see and understand ourselves and the role we play in shaping society?**

**Standards: D4, D5, D7, D9, D10, D11, D13, D14.**

In this unit, students will discuss the rhythm and meter of excerpts from *Fences* in an effort to discover the music and poetry in Wilson’s writing. Although the Blues were a major influence in Wilson’s writing, we have deliberately avoided activities in which students create their own blues songs in order to channel their thinking toward the inherent complexity behind the influence of this art form on Wilson’s prose.

“Wilson validates the vernacular that is inherently musical. . . yet and still the trope of black musicality is often too generalized , too overused, too overdetermined to the point that it has become essentialized, limiting black people to the stereotypical claims that ‘we all got rhythm.’ The expectation that we can all sing and dance. . . At the same time, [Wilson] subverts the stereotype by exploring the pain, as well as the pleasure within the performance.”

“They sing now as survivors, recalling that past . . . Their *a capella* ode is thus time bound and yet transcendent, triumphant and yet tragic. It is a communal, dichotomous moment that contains ‘both a wail and a whelp of joy.’” (Elam)

“Musical instruments, blues songs, recurring lyrical tropes represent, embody and express the “souls of black folks.” (Elam)

### **Guiding Question:**

1. In what way do blues songs convey both pain and joy? (Be careful to consider not only words, but melody, tempo and other elements of music.)
2. What effect does the recurrence of the song, “Old Blue,” have on the play? Keep in mind that the song is revealed throughout the play in increments. Discuss the significance of this.
3. What is the effect of the diction (word choice) and syntax Wilson uses in Troy’s story about his father? Identify significant words, phrases or devices (e.g. repetition) and discuss the way in which it helps to shape your understanding of Troy as a character, as an African American man.
4. Compare and contrast the use of song and story in the play, concentrating in particular on “Old Blue,” and the story about Troy’s father. What do we learn about society from each method of expression? Is one method more effective than the other? Why or why not?
5. Troy received the song, “Old Blue,” from his father and passes it on to his children. He also, in a sense, passes on the story of his father. What impact do you believe this legacy has on his children? What impact will it have on future generations?

**Materials:**

Excerpts from *Fences*:

- “Old Blue,” Act II, Scene 5
- Troy’s story about his father in Act I, Scene 4.

**Anticipatory Set:**

Teacher might want to play a blues song for students, pointing out the meter, rhyme scheme and elements like repetition and tone. Allow time for students to discuss their impressions about the song. Most importantly, students should understand that all language has rhythm and that meter is rhythm that can be measured. It might be a good idea to have students map out the meter and rhyme scheme of the blues song they listened to.

**Small Group Discussion:**

- Allow students to respond to guiding questions in writing before breaking them up into groups in order to allow students who might be quieter to process their answers on their own.
- Break students into groups of four. Assign roles: facilitator, recorder, researcher (person who helps find textual evidence) and reporter.
- Students should discuss their responses to the guiding questions. The teacher may also choose to assign one question per group. Make sure students support their answers with textual evidence.
- Each group reports to the class, their responses to the essential question(s).

**Final Reflection (Journal):**

Think of a song, story or book that has impacted your life. It can be something passed down from a family member or something introduced to you by a friend. Write about why you believe the song or story carries emotional significance for you.

**Discussion:**

Revisit the essential question. Help students make connections between their discussion and the question.

## Art and Arts Literacy Final Activity

This final activity will allow students to reflect on the entire play. The procedures are the same as the activity on African American identity activity so students should be familiar with the procedures. Seminar questions should be assigned as homework.

### Seminar Questions:

1. Based on your understanding of the play, explain why August Wilson titled it, *Fences*. Remember that you should think about the central idea of the drama and about the title in both figurative and symbolic terms. Was this play really about a fence, or was it about something else? How do you know?
2. If you were to change the title of the play, what title would you give it and why?
3. Write down a single line from the play that you believe to be extremely important. Briefly explain why that line is essential/important/significant.
4. Write one question about the play. Your question can be about a character, scene or literary aspect. Your question must begin with the words, “why might” or “what might.”
5. Choose one idea from the play that you believe would make the world a better place if people would understand it. Explain your answer.

### Procedures:

1. Set up the room in a way that allows students to have a large-group discussion as well as provide a place for those who come to class unprepared, to finish their work.
2. Check student’s homework as they enter the room. Send students who come prepared to a place in the discussion circle. Others should take a seat in the other part of the classroom and finish their homework. They may join the circle when they are finished.
3. Review ground rules for seminar:
  - no talking over the discussion
  - no talking under the discussion (e.g. whispering) or having side conversations
  - students should raise their hands to comment
  - students should try to speak in full sentences and/or paragraphs (to practice communicating complete thoughts)
  - students should refer to each other by name
  - the teacher facilitates only when necessary; the discussion belongs to the students.
4. Begin the seminar by allowing each student in the circle to answer one of the questions. This way no one dominates and student who are more shy are forced to participate. You can open the discussion for further comments after the round

- robin has finished. At this point, the teacher steps in only to remind students of ground rules, ask for textual evidence or briefly jump-start silence. In general, however, students can be trusted to fill pregnant pauses.
5. When you begin the response part of the discussion, read the essential question and step back to let the students take over. Every once in awhile it might be necessary to call on people who are not responding to draw them into the discussion.
  6. Continue to answer the questions throughout the class period. You might want to debrief the process or have kids respond to the process itself on paper before they leave.

## Supplemental Texts for Art and Arts Literacy Section

### My Country 'Tis of Thee by W.E.B. DuBois

Of course you have faced the dilemma: it is announced, they all smirk and rise. If they are *ultra*, they remove their hats and look ecstatic; then they look at you. What shall you do? *Noblesse oblige*; you cannot be boorish, or ungracious; and too, after all it is your country and you *do* love its ideals if not all of its realities. Now, then, I have thought of a way out: Arise, gracefully remove your hat, and tilt your head. Then sing as follows, powerfully and with deep unction. They'll hardly note the little changes and their feelings and your conscience will thus be saved:

My country 'tis of thee,  
Late land of slavery,  
    Of thee I sing.  
Land where my father's pride  
Slept where my mother died,  
From every mountain side  
    Let freedom ring!

My native country thee  
Land of the slave set free,  
    Thy fame I love.  
I love thy rocks and rills  
And o'er thy hate which chills,  
My heart with purpose thrills,  
    To *rise* above.

Let laments swell the breeze  
And wring from all the trees  
    Sweet freedom's song.  
Let laggard tongues awake,  
Let all who hear partake,  
Let Southern silence quake,  
    The sound prolong.

Our fathers' God to thee  
Author of Liberty,  
    To thee we sing  
Soon may our land be bright,  
With Freedom's happy light  
Protect us by Thy might,  
    Great God our King.

W. E. B. Du Bois, "My Country 'Tis of Thee" from *Creative Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois* (KrausThomson Organization Limited, 1985).

Reprinted with the permission of the Estate of W. E. B. Du Bois. Source: *Creative Writings by W. E. B. Du Bois* (1985). poetryfoundation .org

## Dreams by Nikki Giovanni

in my younger years  
before i learned  
black people aren't  
suppose to dream  
i wanted to be  
a raelet  
and say "dr o wn d in my youn tears"  
or "tal kin bout tal kin bout"  
or marjorie hendricks and grind  
all up against the mic  
and scream  
"baaaaaby nightandday  
baaaaaby nightandday"  
then as i grew and matured  
i became more sensible  
and decided i would  
settle down  
and just become  
a sweet inspiration

Nikki Giovanni, "Dreams" from *Black Feeling, Black Talk, Black Judgment*. Copyright © 1968, 1970 by Nikki Giovanni. Used with the permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Source: *The Collected Poems of Nikki Giovanni* (2003).  
poetryfoundation.org

## I, Too by Langston Hughes

I, too, sing America.  
I am the darker brother.  
They send me to eat in the kitchen  
When company comes,  
But I laugh,  
And eat well,  
And grow strong.

Tomorrow,  
I'll be at the table  
When company comes.  
Nobody'll dare  
Say to me,  
"Eat in the kitchen,"  
Then.

Besides,  
They'll see how beautiful I am  
And be ashamed—

I, too, am America.

Langston Hughes, "I, Too" from *Collected Poems*. Copyright © 1994 by The Estate of Langston Hughes. Reprinted with the permission of Harold Ober Associates Incorporated.

Source: *Twentieth-Century American Poetry* (2004).  
poetryfoundation.org

***Fences* by August Wilson (Excerpt from Act I: Scene I)**

ROSE: Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. You just come along too early.

TROY: There ought not never have been no time called too early . . .

ROSE: They got a lot of colored baseball players now. Jackie Robinson was the first. Folks had to wait for Jackie Robinson.

TROY: I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball better then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play. . . then they ought to have let you play.

## Works Cited in the Art and Arts Literacy Section

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## Vocabulary of Important Terms

<b>Aaron, Hank</b>	Formerly baseball's all-time home-run king, Aaron played 23 years as an outfielder for the Milwaukee (later Atlanta) Braves and Milwaukee Brewers (1954–76). He holds many of baseball's most distinguished records, including runs batted in (2,297), extra base hits (1,477), total bases (6,856) and most years with 30 or more home runs (15). He is also in the top five for career hits and runs.
<b>Abolition (of slavery)</b>	the act of formally repealing an existing practice through legal means, either by making it illegal, or simply no longer allowing it to exist in any form. In the United States, The Abolition Movement refers to the project to end racial slavery and liberate black Americans. The movement gained momentum after the British Parliament outlawed the African slave trade in 1807 and incorporated people from various ethnicities and cultural backgrounds including but not limited to free blacks and liberal whites such as the Quakers. In 1863 slavery was outlawed in the United States with the formal declaration of the Emancipation Proclamation.
<b>American Civil Rights Movement</b>	(1955–1968) refers to the reform movements in the United States aimed at abolishing racial discrimination against African Americans and restoring suffrage in Southern states.
<b>Barnstorm</b>	To travel around an area appearing in exhibition sports events, especially baseball games.
<b>Batter's Box</b>	the box in which a batter stands when batting. Lies to the left or right of home plate depending on whether the batter is right or left handed.
<b>Bell, Cool Papa</b>	(May 17, 1903 – March 7, 1991) was an American center fielder in Negro league baseball, considered by many baseball observers to have been the fastest man ever to play the game. He was elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in 1974.
<b>Brown v. Board of Education</b>	was a landmark decision of the United States Supreme Court, which declared that state laws that established separate public schools for black and white students denied black children equal educational opportunities. This victory paved the way for integration and the civil rights movement.
<b>Bunt</b>	to hit a baseball in such a way so as to make it go a short distance. Typically used to advance a team member on base.
<b>Curve Ball</b>	a ball with spin put on by the pitcher to deceive the batter as to its trajectory. The ball curves away as it reaches the batter.

- Great Depression, The** Initiated in 1929 with the crash of the stock market, the period between 1930 and approximately 1940 saw a drastic wave of unemployment sweep the country and reverberate throughout the world. Economies world over were affected. In the United States the government responded by creating several federal work and social aid programs to support the citizenry during these trying times. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Works Progress (Project) Administration helped create thousands of jobs across the country, thereby alleviating some of the pressure of poverty and also strengthening the infrastructure of the United States with railways, highways, water-works, etc. The start of World War II helped usher in massive production in the US and around the world.
- DuBois. W.E.B.** (February 23, 1868 – August 27, 1963) William Edward Burghardt Du Bois was an African American civil rights activist, public intellectual, Pan-Africanist, sociologist, educator, historian, writer, editor, poet, and scholar. The Editor-in-Chief of *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, publications circulated by the NAACP, an organization he helped found. Du Bois wrote and published over 4,000 articles, essays and books over the course of the 95-year life. Among his most significant works are *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), *John Brown* (1909), *Black Reconstruction* (1935), and *Black Folk, Then and Now* (1939).
- Dunbar, Paul Laurence** (June 27, 1872 -- February 9, 1906) was the first African-American poet to garner national critical acclaim. Born in Dayton, Ohio, in 1872, Dunbar penned a large body of dialect poems, standard English poems, essays, novels and short stories before he died at the age of 33. His work often addressed the difficulties encountered by members of his race and the efforts of African-Americans to achieve equality in America. He was praised both by the prominent literary critics of his time and his literary contemporaries.
- Fence, The** also known as "the wall," the fence in baseball marks the boundary of a baseball stadium. To "hit one to the fences" would be to hit a ball beyond the boundaries of the stadium and, therefore, make a homerun.
- Foster, Rube** (September 17, 1879 - December 9, 1930) covered the entire spectrum of baseball and excelled at each phase of his participation. As a raw-talent rookie pitcher soon after the turn of the century, the big 6'4" Texan is credited with 51 victories in 1902, including a win over the great "Rube" Waddell, the game in which he received his nickname. Black baseball's greatest manager, Foster was most responsible for its continued existence. He was voted into the National Baseball Hall of Fame in 1981.
- Full Count** status of a batter who has two strikes and three balls, which in baseball means that the batter is either out or on base on the next pitch.

- Gem of the Ocean** set in 1904, begins August Wilson's century-long cycle chronicling black American life. Bewildered by the collapse of the old slave regime, the first generation of black Americans recently freed from slavery are unprepared for the backlash against their newly acquired freedom by whites. Many venture north and find themselves at Aunt Ester's door, seeking solace, advice, or a place to heal. Aunt Ester makes room in the world for those cast aside. She examines and treats wounded souls. Her wisdom is ancient, timeless, connected to the source from which black Americans had been taken. *Gem of the Ocean* introduces us finally to Aunt Ester, keeper of the flame.
- Gentleman's Agreement** is an informal agreement between two or more parties. It may be written, oral, or simply understood as part of an unspoken agreement by convention or through mutually beneficial etiquette. The essence of a gentleman's agreement is that it relies upon the honor of the parties for its fulfillment, rather than being in any way enforceable. A segregationist policy lasted for 60 years that barred African-Americans from Major League Baseball. This ban was finally broken by the Brooklyn Dodgers' signing of Jackie Robinson in 1945.
- Going Down Swinging** an idiom used when a batter keeps swinging at pitches and strikes out but does not give up.
- Greenlee, Gus** (December 26, 1893—July 7, 1952) was a Negro League baseball owner and an African American businessman. Born in Marion, North Carolina, he migrated to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania's Hill District in 1916. After working several menial jobs, he established a bootlegging business that he operated from his taxi. He later made his reputation as a numbers runner and racketeer, as well as the owner of the Crawford Grill nightclub and the Negro League baseball team the Pittsburgh Crawfords. He was also known as a philanthropist who helped fellow blacks in his community with scholarships for schooling and with grants to buy homes.
- Gibson, Josh** (December 21, 1911 - January 20, 1947) was an American catcher in baseball's Negro Leagues. He played for the Homestead Grays from 1930 to 1931, moved to the Pittsburgh Crawfords from 1932 to 1936, and returned to the Grays from 1937 to 1939 and 1942 to 1946. In 1933 he hit .467 with 55 home runs in 137 games against all levels of competition. His lifetime batting average is said to be higher than .350, with other sources putting it as high as .384, the best in Negro League history. He reportedly hit "almost 800" homers in his 17-year career against Negro League and independent baseball. His lifetime batting average, according to the Hall of Fame's official data, was .359. It was reported that he won nine home-run titles and four batting championships playing for the Crawfords and the Homestead Grays. In two seasons in the late 1930s, it was written that not only did he hit higher than .400, but his slugging percentage was above 1.000. *The Sporting News* of June 3, 1967 credits Gibson with a home run in a Negro League game at Yankee Stadium that struck two feet from the top of the wall circling the center field bleachers, about 580 feet from home plate. Although it has never been conclusively proven, Chicago American Giants infielder Jack Marshall said Gibson slugged one over the third deck next to the left field bullpen in

1934 for the only fair ball hit out of Yankee Stadium. There is no published season-by-season breakdown of Gibson's home run totals in all the games he played in various leagues and exhibitions.

**Industrial  
Revolution**

was a period in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries when major changes in agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation had a profound effect on the socioeconomic and cultural conditions in North America and Europe. The Industrial Revolution instigated a shift from manual-labor-based economies towards machine-based manufacturing. Trade expansion was enabled by the introduction of canals, improved roads and railways.

**Jim Crow**

Segregation, or “Jim Crow law” the enforced, at one time legal, separation of the races in the United States based on racial prejudice and assumptions of racial superiority that was contested largely in the public realm as it pertained to people of color accessing social services such as public transportation, public drinking fountains and bathrooms, schools, theaters and stores. Segregation also influenced miscegenation (interracial or interethnic marriage or dating) hiring practices, legal representation, voting practices, medical care and housing. Citizens, business owners, state and federal officials, terrorist mob groups and the KKK enforced segregation. The Civil Rights Movement spurred the US Supreme Court to declare segregation officially unconstitutional in 1954. Its retraction throughout the country proved both slow and very violent.

**King Jr., Dr.  
Martin Luther**

(January 15, 1929 – April 4, 1968) was a leader in the American civil rights movement. A Baptist minister, King became a civil rights activist early in his career. He led the Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955–6) and helped found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (1957), serving as its first president. His efforts led to the 1963 March on Washington, where King delivered his “I Have a Dream” speech. There, he raised public consciousness of the civil rights movement and established himself as one of the greatest orators in U.S. history. In 1964, King became the youngest person to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for his work to end segregation and racial discrimination through civil disobedience and other non-violent means. By the time of his death in 1968, he had refocused his efforts on ending poverty and opposing the Vietnam War, both from a religious perspective. King was assassinated on April 4, 1968, in Memphis, Tennessee. He was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977 and Congressional Gold Medal in 2004; Martin Luther King, Jr. Day was established as a national holiday in the United States in 1986.

**King Hedley II**

is the ninth play in August Wilson's ten-play 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cycle chronicling the lives of African Americans decade by decade. Set in the 1980s, it is the sequel to *Seven Guitars*, a play in which young Ruby chose Hedley and she named their child King. We meet King the second as a grown man, fighting to survive a life that seems never to look bright. King carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. At times, he even seems strapped with a curse. Yet King imagines that he is crowned instead, adorned with halo whose meaning he does not yet know. *King Hedley II* is a riveting play about the past revisiting a man struggling to free himself from the grip of his family's legacy while desperate to hold on to his loved ones.

**Ku Klux  
Klansman**

a member of the white supremacist, segregationist, anti-Semitic fraternal terrorist organization originated in the United States created at the end of the Civil War. Known particularly for its acts of hate against blacks in the American South that includes lynching (murder), cross-burning, violence against children and bombings. The KKK is particularly outspoken about "racial purity" and the "threat of miscegenation." In recent years the organization has also expressed anti-homosexual views as well.

**Little Rock,  
Arkansas**

the city in which nine black school children were besieged by racial hatred for trying to enter the segregated public high school in 1957. The group became known as the Little Rock Nine. The ensuing Little Rock Crisis, in which the students were initially prevented from entering the racially segregated school by Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, and then attended after the intervention of President Eisenhower, is considered to be one of the most important events in the American Civil Rights Movement.

**Montgomery,  
Alabama**

the first capital of the Confederate States of America, Montgomery became a hotspot for Civil Rights activity in the 1950s and 1960s. Rev. Dr. Martin L. King Jr. gained national attention for civil rights issues during his tenure (1954 to 1960) as pastor of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, two blocks from the State Capitol Building. A civil rights memorial has been erected near the still-active church. On December 1, 1955 Rosa Parks became a civil rights heroine in the city by refusing to give up her bus seat to a white man. The reaction to this arrest led to the 382-day Montgomery Bus Boycott, which forced the city to desegregate its transit system on December 21, 1956. In 1965, Dr. King's nationally publicized march for justice was conducted from Selma to Montgomery.

**Montgomery Bus  
Boycott**

was a political and social protest campaign started in 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, intended to oppose the city's policy of racial segregation on its public transit system. The ensuing struggle lasted from December 1, 1955, to December 20, 1956, and led to a United States Supreme Court decision that declared the Alabama and Montgomery laws requiring segregated buses unconstitutional.

- Negro League** was an American professional baseball league comprising predominantly African-American teams. The term may be used broadly to include professional black teams outside the leagues and it may be used narrowly for the seven relatively successful leagues beginning 1920 that are sometimes termed "Negro Major Leagues." The first professional team, established in 1885, achieved great and lasting success as the Cuban Giants, while the first league, the National Colored Base Ball League, failed in 1887 after only two weeks due to low attendance. The Negro American League of 1951 is considered the last major league season.
- Paige, Satchel** (July 7, 1906–June 8, 1982) was an American baseball player whose pitching in the Negro Leagues and in Major League Baseball made him a legend of American baseball. Paige is often credited with having recorded more than 300 career shutouts. His career win total is estimated at well over 1500 games, a figure which includes virtually countless appearances in exhibition games against all levels of competition both in the United States and south of the border.
- Parks, Rosa** (February 4, 1913 – October 24, 2005) was an African American civil rights activist whom the U.S. Congress later called "Mother of the Modern-Day Civil Rights Movement". On December 1, 1955 in Montgomery, Alabama, Parks refused to obey the bus driver's order that she give up her seat to make room for a white passenger. Parks' civil disobedience sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott. This movement turned Parks into an international icon of resistance to racial segregation and launched boycott leader Martin Luther King, Jr. to national prominence in the civil rights movement. Parks eventually received honors ranging from the 1979 Spingarn Medal to a posthumous statue in the United States Capitol's National Statuary Hall. At the time of her action, Parks was secretary of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP and had recently attended the Highlander Folk School, a Tennessee center for workers' rights and racial equality. Although widely honored in later years for her action, she also suffered for it, losing her job as a seamstress in a local department store.
- Radio Golf** is the last play in August Wilson's 20th Century Cycle chronicling the African American experience decade by decade. It is the story of a man whose path through life has been decreed by his father. Following in the footsteps of a well-respected but feared man, Harmond Wilks struggles to evade his shadow. He does what is expected of him in order to help his community, but it is ultimately his own journey and rejection of the grandeur which awaits him that brings him back to the people of Pittsburgh's Hill District.

**Robinson, Jackie**

(January 31, 1919 – October 24, 1972) Jack Roosevelt "Jackie" Robinson became the first African-American major league baseball player of the modern era in 1947. While not the first African American professional baseball player in United States history, his Major League debut with the Brooklyn Dodgers ended approximately eighty years of baseball segregation, also known as the baseball color line, or color barrier. In the United States at this time, many white people believed that blacks and whites should be segregated or kept apart in many phases of life, including sports and daily life. The Baseball Hall of Fame inducted Robinson in 1962 and he was a member of six World Series teams. In addition to his accomplishments on the field, Jackie Robinson was also a forerunner of the Civil Rights Movement. In the 1960s, he was a key figure in the establishment and growth of the Freedom National Bank, an African-American owned and controlled entity based in Harlem, New York. He also wrote a syndicated newspaper column for a number of years, in which he was an outspoken supporter of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. In recognition of his accomplishments, Robinson was posthumously awarded a Congressional Gold Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. On April 15, 1997, the 50 year anniversary of his debut, Major League Baseball retired the jersey number 42, the number he wore, across all MLB teams in recognition of his accomplishments both on and off the field in a ceremony at Shea Stadium.

**Segregation**

or "Jim Crow law" the enforced, at one time legal, separation of the races in the United States based on racial prejudice and assumptions of racial superiority that was contested largely in the public realm as it pertained to people of color accessing social services such as public transportation, public drinking fountains and bathrooms, schools, theaters and stores. Segregation also influenced miscegenation (interracial or interethnic marriage or dating) hiring practices, legal representation, voting practices, medical care and housing. Citizens, business owners, state and federal officials, terrorist mob groups and the KKK enforced segregation. The Civil Rights Movement spurned the US Supreme Court to declare segregation officially unconstitutional in 1954. Its retraction throughout the country proved both slow and very violent.

**Southern  
Manifesto**

was a document written in February-March 1956 by legislators in the United States Congress opposed to racial integration in public places. The manifesto was signed by 101 politicians from Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. The document was largely drawn up to counter the landmark Supreme Court 1954 ruling *Brown v. Board of Education*, which integrated public schools. The initial version was written by Strom Thurmond and the final version mainly by Richard Russell. The manifesto was signed by 19 Senators and 81 members of the House of Representatives, including the entire congressional delegations of the states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Virginia. School segregation laws were some of the most enduring and best-known of the Jim Crow laws that characterized the American South and several northern states at the time. The Southern Manifesto accused the Supreme Court of "clear abuse of judicial power." It further promised to use "all lawful means to bring about a reversal of this decision which is contrary to the Constitution and to prevent the use of force in its implementation."

**Strike Out**

a baseball term. A batter makes an out by either swinging and missing the pitch or not hitting good pitches.

**Uncle Remus**

is a fictional character, the title character and fictional narrator of a collection of African American folktales including animal stories, songs, and oral folklore, collected from adapted and compiled by a white writer, Joel Chandler Harris, who published them in book form in 1881. A journalist in post-Reconstruction Atlanta, Georgia's West End, Harris produced seven Uncle Remus books. The genre of stories follows the trickster tales like those found in West Africa, however resituated by a white writer, the tales lose much of their cultural authenticity. At the time of Harris' publication, his work was praised for its ability to capture "plantation Negro dialect." The term "uncle" was a patronizing, familiar and often racist title reserved by whites for elderly black men in the South, which is considered by many to be pejorative and offensive.

**Washington,  
Booker T.**

(April 5, 1856 – November 14, 1915) was an influential educator, political leader and author working at the turn of the century. He was the founding principal of the Tuskegee Institute. He is perhaps most famous for his autobiography *Up From Slavery* and his 1895 address in Atlanta wherein he suggested that the best way for African Americans to participate within US society was to redirect efforts to end segregation in order to focus on education and developing a skilled labor force. His debates over this with **W.E.B. DuBois**, who considered Washington an apologist, are well-known.

**Wilson, August**

(April 27, 1945—October 2, 2005) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning African American playwright. Called "one of the most important voices in the American theater today" by Mervyn Rothstein in the *New York Times*, August Wilson's authentic sounding characters have brought a new understanding of the black experience to audiences around the country. For example, *Fences*, tells the story of a black baseball player who broke national records by leaps and bounds but was prevented from playing outside of the Negro Leagues. *Fences* opened on Broadway in the spring of 1987 to enormous critical acclaim and earned Wilson his first Pulitzer Prize. Wilson's work gives audiences the opportunity to go back and reexamine American history through characters that are epic, poignant and defiantly struggling against the institutionalized legacy of racism in this country.

## Fences: An Annotated Bibliography of Select Works

Elam, Harry Justin. *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004.

Theater scholar and critic Harry J. Elam examines Wilson's published plays within the context of contemporary African American literature and in relation to the concepts of memory and history, culture and resistance, race and representation. Elam finds that each of Wilson's plays recaptures narratives lost, ignored, or avoided to create a new experience of the past that questions the historical categories of race and meanings of blackness.

Williams, Dana A. and Sandra G. Shannon, eds. *August Wilson and Black Aesthetics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

*August Wilson and Black Aesthetics* offers new essays that address issues raised in Wilson's "The Ground on Which I Stand" speech. Essays and interviews range from examinations of the presence of Wilson's politics in his plays to the limitations of these politics on contemporary interpretations of Black aesthetics.

Snodgrass, Mary Ellen. *August Wilson: A Literary Companion*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co, 2004.

Provides the reader with a source of basic data and analysis of characters, dates, events, allusions, staging strategies, and themes from the work on one of America's finest playwrights. The text opens with an annotated chronology of Wilson's life and works, followed by his family tree. Each of the 166 encyclopedic entries that make up the body of the work combines insights from a variety of sources along with generous citations; each concludes with a selected bibliography on relevant subjects. Charts elucidate the genealogies of Wilson's characters, the Charles, Hedley, and Maxson families, and account for weaknesses in Wilson's female characters. Two appendices complete the generously cross-referenced work: a timeline of events in Wilson's life and those of his characters, and a list of forty topics for projects, composition, and oral analysis.

Elkins, Marilyn. *August Wilson: A Casebook*. New York: Garland, 2000.

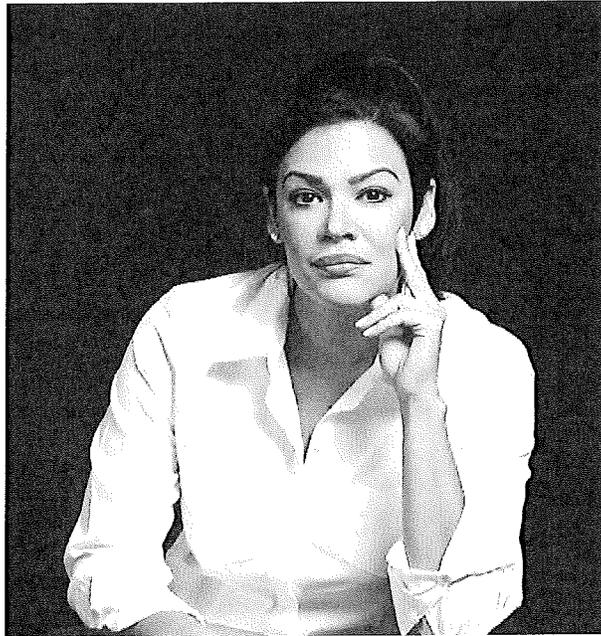
A comprehensive casebook that covers the political and cultural contexts of Wilson's plays; the conjunction of secular and spiritual traditions; Wilson's creative process; Wilson's collaboration with Lloyd Richards; the influence of Bearden, Baraka, Borges, and the blues upon Wilson's work; and an interview with the playwright.

Bogumil, Mary. *Understanding August Wilson*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South

Carolina Press, 1999.

This piece covers six of Wilson's plays including *The Piano Lesson*. The book opens with a chapter on August Wilson as an African American playwright, discussing his life as well as what distinguishes his plays from those of other African American playwrights. Bogumil contextualizes Wilson's plays within societal factors, and has crafted a scholarly work that makes August Wilson's writing approachable and understandable to anyone from students to casual readers.

## About the Writer...



**Sarah Bellamy** is Co-Artistic Director for Penumbra Theatre Company. She has designed several programs that engage patrons in critical thinking, dialogue, and action around issues of race and social justice. Select programs include Penumbra's Race Workshop curated to accompany the Science Museum of Minnesota's exhibit *RACE: Are We So Different?* and the Summer Institute, a leadership development program for teens to practice art for social change.

A skilled facilitator, Ms. Bellamy works with learners of all ages to engage in sometimes difficult conversations about race and American history. Using theatre as a site for critique, modeling and problem-solving, participants begin to see themselves and the potential for their own activism as empowering and inspired.

Ms. Bellamy is the principal scholar and editor for Penumbra Theatre Company and in that capacity supervises the August Wilson Fellowship Program, a doctoral fellowship in dramaturgy and literary criticism, in partnership with the University of Minnesota. Since 2005, she has researched and composed over twenty contextual essays to accompany Penumbra's main-stage productions. In conjunction with these comprehensive study guides, she oversees the creation of standardized, original curricula for educators to engage culturally specific arts in their classrooms.

A graduate of Sarah Lawrence College, Ms. Bellamy holds an M.A. in the Humanities from The University of Chicago and is currently the Visiting Professor of Theatre and Culture at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities. She serves as the Vice Chair of the Board of Directors for Theatre Communications Group and is Chair of the TCG Diversity, Inclusion, and Equity Committee.