



Season for Young People

Insights and Ideas

August Wilson's *Fences*

Presented by Nashville Repertory Theatre

Troy Maxson's yard is his refuge, a sanctuary where, at long last, the grass is finally green. But it can always be greener, right? Troy's story is both unique and universal — a portrait of the unsteady bridge between fathers and sons, and the wives and mothers who stand cheering for both sides while hanging their own dreams out to dry. A story strong enough to bear the weight of injustice and yearning and love, at its best and its most destructive. And it's bigger — it's more — than all of that. *Fences* is a lyrical, heartbreaking love song sung in August Wilson's unparalleled poetry, about people whose hearts beat vast and deep.

Facts about August Wilson

- ✓ Originally a poet and short-story writer, Wilson's first experience with theater wasn't until 1968, when he and a friend started Black Horizons Theatre Company in Pittsburgh. There, Wilson learned to direct plays, but still didn't consider writing them. It wasn't until 1977 that he converted some of his poems into a play. Called *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, the production was a success, but Wilson doesn't count that play as part of his playwriting career. Instead, he says, his career began in 1979 with his work on *Jitney*.
- ✓ Wilson won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award for his play *Fences*. Set in the 1950s, *Fences* explored the themes of the ever-evolving Black experience and race relations in America.
- ✓ After he had written three plays, each set in a different decade of the twentieth century, Wilson set for himself the task of writing seven additional plays, one for each of the remaining decades in the century, each illuminating the African American experience of that time. *Fences* was the sixth of the playwright's 10-part series called The Pittsburgh Cycle (aka The Century Cycle), which defined each "part" by decade. The process of writing these plays, Wilson says, will begin with a single line of dialog that surfaces from his creative depths.
- ✓ Wilson's prolific career of writing inspired a national education outreach project, and the toolkit can still be used today! The goal of The August Wilson Education Project is to encourage students to develop their unique voice while exploring the timeless themes prevalent in Wilson's work: community, identity, diversity, activism, self-reliance, and resilience. Check out their website and toolkit. <https://www.wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit>

The Characters

- **Troy Maxson:** The protagonist of the play, Troy, is an African-American man in his 50s who works as a garbage man. He is also a former baseball star, but his athletic abilities diminished before the Major Leagues accepted Blacks, and his resentment and anger frame much of his thinking about the world. Hard-working, strong, and prone to telling tall tales. Troy's character is the centerpiece that all other relationships gather around. Troy is husband to Rose, father to Lyons, Cory, and Raynell, and brother to Gabriel. He is a tragic hero who has excessive pride and struggles to show love to those who love him.
- **Cory Maxson:** The teenage son of Troy and Rose Maxson, Cory is a senior in high school who gets good grades and excels on the football team. Cory is a respectful son, a compassionate nephew to his uncle Gabriel, and generally a giving and enthusiastic person. An ambitious young man who has the talent and determination to realize his dreams, Cory's opportunities are very different from those of his father. Cory yearns for acceptance from his father while still wanting to be his own man.
- **Rose Maxson:** Troy's wife and mother of Cory. Rose is a housewife who volunteers at her church regularly and loves her family deeply. Rose's request that Troy and Cory build a fence in their small, dirt backyard comes to represent her desire to keep her loved one together and close. Rose is a realist, not a romantic yearning for the days past. She has high hopes for Cory and supports his dreams and aspirations.
- **Gabriel Maxson:** Troy's younger brother, Gabriel was a soldier in World War II, during which time he received a head injury that required a metal plate to be surgically implanted in his head. Because of his brain damage and service to his country, Gabriel receives checks from the government that Troy used to help pay for the Maxson home, where the play is set. He spends his days wondering about the neighborhood, thinking that he is the angel Gabriel whose job it is to open the gates to heaven. Gabriel thinks like a young child and is motivated by a desire to please people, especially his brother, Troy.
- **Jim Bono:** Troy's best friend of over thirty years. Troy is a role model to Bono, as Bono is the only character in the play who remembers Troy's glory days of baseball. Bono spends every Friday night over at Troy's house drinking beers and telling stories.
- **Lyons Maxson:** Troy's older son, fathered before Troy's time in jail with a woman Troy met before he met Rose. Lyons is an ambitious and talented jazz musician. He grew up without Troy for most of his childhood because Troy was in prison. Lyons does not live in the Maxson home but comes around most often on Troy's payday. Lyons is well-liked by everyone, but often argues with his father.
- **Raynell Maxson:** Troy's illegitimate daughter, mothered by Troy's lover, Alberta. Wilson introduces her to the audience as an infant; her innocence and vulnerability convince Rose to take Troy back.
- **Alberta:** Troy's lover, Raynell's mother, Alberta dies while giving birth.
- **Bonnie:** Lyons' girlfriend.
- **Mr. Stawicki:** Cory's boss at the A&P grocery store.
- **Coach Zellman:** Cory's high school football coach.
- **Mr. Rand:** Bono and Troy's boss at the Sanitation Department.
- **Miss Pearl:** Gabe's landlady at his new apartment.

Discussion Questions

- August Wilson has said he uses what he calls “The Big Themes” - love, honor, duty, betrayal. Do you see these themes in *Fences*? Do you see these themes in other plays by Wilson?
- How does the way society is structured help some but hinder others?
- How does lack of opportunity and discrimination affect individuals? What is the impact on society as a whole? How can this discussion inspire us to create a more equitable society?
- How does society impact the individual? How does the individual impact society?
- Explain the ending of this play. Why does Wilson choose to end the play this way? What does he want us to walk away thinking about?
- Is there a hero in this story? If so, who is it?
- Which character changed the most throughout the play, and why/how?
- Do you think the title *Fences* accurately described this show? What fences existed between characters? Which fences were the most powerful in the show, the symbolic or concrete/physical?

Classroom Activities

A Eulogy for Troy Maxson

The play ends with the reuniting of characters for the funeral of the central figure of *Fences*, Troy Maxson. Imagine the play continued and the audience heard the eulogy of Troy. Without much discussion, students should independently decide who they believe would deliver Troy’s eulogy. From the perspective of that character, students should generate a list of some biographical information on Troy (age, upbringing, job, family, major life events, responsibilities, ambitions, disappointments, regrets) as well as Troy’s admirable qualities and weaknesses. After generating this list, guide the students in a discussion about eulogy as a genre of writing. If any students have written or witnessed one, they may describe their experience. Once students understand the format and concept of a eulogy, they may work independently to write a eulogy for Troy from the perspective of the character they chose. Once completed, the eulogies may be shared in groups or before the class.

Her Story

Write a one-act sequel or prequel to *Fences*, with Rose as the central character. Write a one-act sequel to *Fences* with Raynell as the central character. Share your work with the August Wilson Education Project at wqed.org/augustwilson/toolkit/share or augustwilsonedu@wqed.org.

Troy’s Legacy

Imagine Cory’s life after the events that took place in *Fences*. Write a monologue for him set in the future, when he is Troy’s age.

Blues and Hughes

In interviews Wilson has stated that the blues and Langston Hughes influenced his writing, how is this true? Where in the text is evidence for this?

Listen to various blues songs and the poetry of Langston Hughes to examine tone and structure in the “blues stanza”. Can you write your own blues stanza?

When Wilson says the blues are literature, he is not exaggerating its importance but underscoring the blues’ sublime literary qualities. The blues are brief bursts of sonic fiction that vibrate with signifying lyrics, double entendres, and the effortless interplay between personal and social forces. The blues give lyrical shape to the hurts and affections that stymie and transform black life. The blues tap comedy to temper tragedy—and to tame the absurd. Wilson’s characters mouth those truths with moral clarity.

Excerpted from National Endowment for the Humanities (www.neh.gov) Article “August Wilson’s Blues Poetry” by Michael Eric Dyson