

## Fenced In by a Lifetime of Resentments

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### Document Text

#### FENCES

FENCES. Play by August Wilson, starring James Earl Jones. Directed by Lloyd Richards. With Mary Alice, Ray Aranha, Charles Brown, Frankie R. Faison, Karima Miller and Courtney B. Vance. Forty-sixth Street Theater on Broadway.

IN THE OLD DAYS of the Negro Leagues, he had a big home run swing, hitting the ball far beyond the fences of now-forgotten stadiums. Now a 53-year-old sanitation worker, his body gone to paunch, Troy Maxson finds fences hemming him in instead of challenging him. But he's still gutsy and expansive, a man who can brag about wrestling with death and make you see it as a struggle between equals.

Troy is a yarn-spinner, a teller of raunchy jokes, a womanizer, a demanding husband, a harsh, inflexible father. James Earl Jones gives this role at the heart of August Wilson's "Fences" its full measure of earthiness and complexity. His superlative acting matches his memorable Jack Jefferson in "The Great White Hope."

When Jones' Troy Maxson is laughing with his pal while they share a pint of gin, the play swells to match his oversized dimensions. At other times, however, when he is fighting with his athlete son or scrapping with his put-upon wife, "Fences" shrinks to the conventional confines of a family play.

Wilson, whose "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" was such a remarkable playwriting debut, hasn't given "Fences" the same flashes of poetry and flashpoint of rage at racial injustice, even though both elements are present. The family conflicts are curiously schematic, giving the impression that Wilson was less interested in such routine fare than in depicting a black man forced to come to terms with an unfeeling white world.

The central struggle pits Troy against his son Cory (Courtney B. Vance), a high-school football star who's good enough, in the thawing racial environment of 1957, to have a college recruiter after him. Evoking his own crushed sports career, Troy insists that Cory keep his after-hours job at the A&P and give up football. "The white man," he growls, "ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway."

Cory's feelings about his domineering father emerge in a flat question, "How come you ain't never liked me?" - evaded by Troy in a speech about fulfilling his family responsibility (a word that resounds throughout "Fences"). And the boy's loaded accusation - Troy is afraid his son will surpass him athletically - is left unexplored.

There is more passion in the fight between Troy and his wife, Rose (Mary Alice), when he tells her that another woman is carrying his child. Rose's anger and humiliation have her pounding on his massive chest. Troy's description of the life that led him to stray is like Churchill strained through a garbage man's bone-weariness: "I give you my sweat and my blood. I ain't got no tears. I done spent them."

The fence Troy is building to enclose their tiny yard serves as a metaphor both for Rose's desire to fence in her rambling husband and for the barriers erected between family members.

Wilson's sharply attuned ear for the rhythms of his characters is displayed by the men who show up in the yard (a beautifully detailed set by James D. Sandefur), where a ball suspended on a rope serves as a sad memento of Troy's career. Troy's brother (Frankie R. Faison), his mind destroyed by a wartime injury, stumbles in trailing his pathetic delusions, and his son from a previous marriage (Charles Brown) keeps showing up to borrow money and nurse his illusion that he is a jazzman.

Lloyd Richards (who also directed "Ma Rainey") has given the play an understanding production, although it grows languid on occasion. In the good supporting cast, Mary Alice's intensely felt Rose and Ray Aranha's drinking cronies are most notable.

Jones' performance is at its heartiest in the bouts of drinking and bantering. He mingles indignation and humor when Troy describes the racial barriers he is battering at his job, and he warms with the linked memories of an early sexual encounter and a showdown with his own hard father.

The actor makes us see the fragility beneath Troy's harshness and the pride in his talk of providing for his family, however meanly. At those times, "Fences" becomes a rich portrait of a man who scaled down his dreams to fit inside his run-down yard.

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### **Abstract** (Document Summary)

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