AUDIENCE EXPECTATIONS

Going to see a theatrical performance is an incredibly exciting and entertaining experience. In order to enhance that experience, here are some things to keep in mind:

Take your seat.
Be sure to get to your seat in time to ready yourself for the journey you’ll take with this production.

Turn off your cell phone.
The messages and texts can wait until later — get into the world of the show completely!

Get ready to watch carefully.
The wonderful thing about live theatre is that it’s happening right there before you! Be sure to soak it all in.

Let the actors do the talking.
Feel free to laugh at the jokes and be moved by the drama, but save your commentary for the conversation with the class after the show.

Show your appreciation.
When the show is over, applaud for the actors and wait for the curtain call to be over before leaving your seat. To show them your highest praise, give them a standing ovation.
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 its belly until it burst into a thousand furnaces and sewing machines, a thousand butcher shops and bakers’ ovens, a thousand churches and hospitals and funeral parlors and money lenders. 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, settled along the riverbanks and under bridges in shallow, ramshackle houses made of sticks and tar paper. 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 and dignity and whatever eloquence the heart could call upon. By 1957, the hard-won victories of the 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.

DIRECTOR’S NOTE FOR FENCES

By Tawnya Pettiford-Wates, Ph.D.
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August Wilson is one of the most important playwrights of the American Theatre. His Century Cycle tells the story of the African American experience throughout the twentieth century over 100 years. Through each decade from 1900 to 2000 we come to know the people, families, and history of the Black community in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Each play builds upon the next and reveals the soul and spirit of our community through struggle, passion, pain and pathos with unmitigated truth and revelation. Only one play in the entire Century Cycle takes place outside of the Hill District of Pittsburgh and that is Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom which is set in Chicago, Illinois.

August Wilson is a poet/storyteller and the script for Fences is like jazz, blues and gospel music in spoken language. Fences captures in the text and in a variety of voices the polyphonic multisyllabic rhythms of Black culture almost as if it were a musical score played by a classic jazz quartet. It is a family drama that displays all of the complexities of living as a Black family in 1957, in a major industrial city after the Great Migration. In 1957, where we begin, America was a nation struggling with the contradictions in the platitudes it professed as a nation of “Life, Liberty and Justice for All,” and the reality of segregation and inequality that existed for Black Americans. The Hill District, where the action of the play takes place, was where the strife and struggles faced by African Americans were lessened to a degree because of the community itself. There was a measure of self-determination, economic empowerment and entrepreneurial enterprise that existed in the Hill District because segregation dictated that whites and blacks did not mix. That necessitated an acknowledgement that we had to depend upon one another; it made the community value itself and its people. There was a sense of pride within the Black community of the Hill District that lifted it above the everyday struggle of living in an America that did not see Black people as equal or valued citizens. The story of Troy and Rose Maxson and their family is ultimately a story of struggle, hope, duty and honor. Wilson reveals through this family’s story the power of love, in its many forms, to provoke, inspire and transform both the dreams we have and the reality in which we live.

Fences is not about right and wrong as much as it’s about what is and is not true. “Some people build fences to keep people out and other people build them to keep people in.” - spoken by Bono, Troy’s best friend
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

August Wilson (1945 - 2005)

August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to a white German immigrant father Frederick Kittel and black mother Daisy Wilson. After his father’s death, he changed his name to August Wilson as an homage to his mother. Later, Wilson stated that the learning and nurturing of his life were “all black ideas about the world that I learned from my mother. My mother’s a very strong woman. My female characters come in large part from my mother.”

In the late 1950s, the family moved to a predominantly white suburb of Pittsburgh known as Hazelwood. Wilson attended school until 1961 when he dropped out at age 15. He left school because “I was bored. I didn’t do any work until my history teacher assigned us to write a paper on a historical personage.” Wilson chose to write about Napoleon, having always been intrigued with the “self-made emperor.” The paper ended up being 20 pages long and his sister assisted him in typing it on a borrowed typewriter. Since Wilson had previously done no work in the classroom, his instructor was convinced it wasn’t his own. The teacher asked Wilson to prove he didn’t plagiarize, and instead of obliging, he took a failing grade, tore the paper up, and walked out of school. “I don’t feel I should have to prove anything,” Wilson had said.

Instead of attending school, Wilson went to the library every day and read upwards of four hundred books over the course of the next few years. His passion for reading eventually led him to pursue a career as a writer. Channeling his early writing efforts into poetry after being inspired by such esteemed writers as Langston Hughes, Amiri Baraka, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, Wilson saved nickels and dimes until he was able to purchase a $20 used typewriter when he was 19 years old. His political interests led him to become involved in theater a few years later, and in 1968, August Wilson co-founded Pittsburgh’s Black Horizon Theatre Company. He began writing one-act plays as a way to “politicize the community and raise awareness.” This was during the height of the Black Power Movement.

In 1978, August Wilson moved to Minnesota and received a fellowship from the Minneapolis Playwrights Center. “I walked in,” he said of his first encounter there, “and there were sixteen playwrights. It was the first time I had dinner with other playwrights. It was the first time I began to think of myself as one.” The fellowship allowed Wilson to write and stage his first play, Black Bart and the Sacred Hills, and also gave him an opportunity to rework a one-act that later became a full-length play, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom. This play caught the attention of the artistic director of the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center and dean of the Yale School of Drama, Lloyd Richards, who went on to direct the play, and many of Wilson’s subsequent dramas. Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom premiered on Broadway in 1984, and was the first profitable play by a black playwright since Lorraine Hansbury’s 1959 A Raisin in the Sun.

Not long after this time, August Wilson conceived an idea: He would write ten plays, one for each decade of the twentieth century, each focusing on a particular experience of African Americans. Over the next twenty years, he did just that. Along the way, he wrote and rewrote; he won two Pulitzer Prizes; he saw more of his work produced on Broadway. This not only solidified his place as one of the most acclaimed African American playwrights, but also one of the greatest American playwrights of all time.
ABOUT THE PLAY

August Wilson wrote ten plays collectively known as the ‘Century Cycle,’ which explores 100 years of the African American experience in the United States. *Fences* is the third in the cycle, with each play representing each decade of the 20th century.

Set in the small front yard of the Maxson household in 1950s in Pittsburgh’s inner-city Hill District, *Fences* centers on a legendary former baseball player in the Negro League turned trash collector, Troy Maxson, who embodies passion and pride, yet remains powerless to overcome obstacles of racism, familial obligations, and self-imposed emotional fences that bar his every path.

*Fences* was presented as a staged reading at the National Playwrights Conference in 1983 and premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre in April 1985. The following year, it was produced on Broadway to much acclaim. The production featured James Earl Jones as Troy Maxson and ran for over 500 performances, setting a record for a non-musical Broadway production by grossing $11 million in a single year.

*Fences* won many awards: the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the 1987 Tony Award for Best Play, Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Play, Best Performance by a Featured Actress in a Play, Best Featured Actor in a Play, and Best Direction of a Play. It also won Drama Desk Awards for Outstanding New Play, Outstanding Actor in a Play, and Outstanding Featured Actress in a Play. Additionally, *Fences* won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award and the John Gassner Outer Critics’ Circle Award.

A revival in 2010 featured Denzel Washington as Troy Maxson and Viola Davis as Rose. It was nominated for 10 Tony Awards, winning Best Revival of a Play, Best Actor in a Play, and Best Actress in a Play. A film adaptation directed by Denzel Washington in which he also starred with Viola Davis, reprising their roles from the Broadway production, was released in 2016. It was nominated for four Oscars: Best Picture, Best Actor, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Adapted Screenplay. Davis won for her performance. Washington and Davis also received Golden Globe nominations for their performances.

The 1986 production of *Fences* featuring James Earl Jones ran for over 500 performances, setting a record for a non-musical Broadway production by grossing $11 million in a single year.
ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

Fences Characters

Troy Maxson: A fifty-three year-old African American man who works for the sanitation department, lifting garbage into trucks. Troy is also a former baseball star in the Negro Leagues. Hard-working, strong and prone to telling stories and twisting the truth, Troy is the family breadwinner. Troy’s years of hard work for only meager progress depress him.

Cory Maxson: The teenage son of Troy and Rose Maxson. A senior in high school, Cory gets good grades and college recruiters are coming to see him play football. Cory is a respectful son and a giving and enthusiastic person. An ambitious young man who has the talent and determination to realize his dreams, Cory comes of age during the course of the play when he challenges and confronts Troy.

Rose Maxson: Troy’s wife and the mother of his second child, Cory. Rose is a forty-three year-old African American housewife who volunteers at her church regularly and loves her family. Rose’s request that Troy and Cory build a fence in their small, dirt backyard comes to represent her desire to keep her loved ones close to her. Rose has high hopes for her son, Cory.

Gabriel Maxson: Troy’s brother. Gabriel was a soldier in World War II, during which he received a head injury that required a metal plate to be surgically implanted into his head. Because of the physical damage and his service, Gabriel receives checks from the government that Troy used in part to buy the Maxson’s home, where the play takes place. Gabriel wanders around the Maxson family’s neighborhood carrying a basket and singing. He often thinks he is not a person, but the angel Gabriel who opens the gates of heaven with his trumpet for Saint Peter on Judgment Day.

Jim Bono: Troy’s best friend of over thirty years. Bono and Troy met in jail, where Troy learned to play baseball. Troy is a role model to Bono. Bono is the only character in Fences who remembers, first-hand, Troy’s glory days of hitting homeruns in the Negro Leagues. Less controversial than Troy, Bono admires Troy’s leadership at work. Bono spends every Friday after work drinking beers and telling stories with Troy in the Maxson family’s backyard.

Lyons Maxson: Troy’s son, fathered before Troy’s time in jail with a woman Troy met before Troy became a baseball player and before he met Rose. Lyons is an ambitious and talented jazz musician, but like most musicians, has a hard time making a living. For income, Lyons mostly depends on his girlfriend. Lyons does not live with Troy, Rose, and Cory, but frequently comes by the Maxson house on Troy’s payday to ask for money.

Raynell Maxson: Troy’s illegitimate daughter, mothered by Alberta, his lover. Her innocent need for care and support convinces Rose to take Troy back into the house. Later, Raynell plants seeds in the once barren dirt yard. Raynell is the only Maxson child that will live with few scars from Troy, and is emblematic of new hope for the future and the positive values parents and older generations pass on to their young.

Source: As described on Sparknotes
**ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION**

**Fences Themes**

**Familial responsibility** — Troy assumes responsibility as provider, husband, and father, in addition to taking care of his brother, Gabriel. Overwhelmed by these responsibilities, Troy only confides his frustrations in his friend, Jim Bono. Troy seeks escape from his responsibilities by having an affair and fathering a child from it.

**Opportunities and limitations** — Troy was a talented baseball player unable to play in the Major leagues due to being in prison, combined with restrictions on black players in the Major leagues. By the time he was released he had aged out. When Cory, his son, is recruited for an athletic scholarship, he sees opportunity for success, but Troy forbids him from playing football, thereby limiting his own son’s chances.

**Racism** — Troy has experienced racial discrimination as a baseball player and as a trash collector. The Maxsons struggle to achieve their dreams in the 1950s, before African Americans gained equal rights.

**Separation and fences** — Troy was separated from his family when he left home at a young age of 14 and then later again when he went to prison; Cory leaves home because his father denied him an opportunity he wanted; Troy’s promotion separates him from his friend Jim Bono; after Troy’s affair he is separated from his wife and lover and Rose declares him “a womanless man.” The fence serves as both a literal and a figurative device, a key symbol in the separation that affects the Maxson family—Rose wanted a fence to keep her loved ones safe and close to her; Troy wanted the fence to keep intruders (and death) out. The obstacles of racial prejudice, prison bars, familial obligation and self-imposed emotional walls separate Troy from attaining the things he felt he deserved.

**Betrayal** — Troy refuses to allow Cory to play football and kicks his son out of the house over their argument. Troy also has an extramarital affair.

**Death** — Troy battled death when he had pneumonia; he finishes the fence around his house when he feels threatened by death. His own name is a metaphor for the wall erected as a defense barrier against the Athenians during the Trojan War. Troy refers to death as a “fast ball on the outside corner.”

**Seeds and growth** — Characters in *Fences* literally and figuratively use seeds, flowers, plants, and related actions like growing, taking root, planting, and gestation — in both their language and actions. Like August Wilson’s mother whose name is Daisy, Rose has the name of a flower. Rose is a typical African American 1950s housewife and the caretaker of the family and home. She represents care and nurturing, attributes also frequently used to grow plants. Like the characteristics of the flower after which she is named, Rose is a beautiful soul who protects her family and protects herself when Troy hurts her. Rose is sedentary, like the flower, growing upward in the same spot. She relates her decision to live life invested in her husband’s life even though she knows he will never be as successful as they once hoped.

Later in the play, Rose’s description of her life is a metaphor for planting. She says, “I took all my feelings, my wants and needs, my dreams...and I buried them inside you. I planted a seed and watched and prayed over it. I planted myself inside you and waited to bloom. And it didn’t take me no eighteen years to find out the soil was hard and rocky and it wasn’t never gonna bloom.” Rose balances the rocky and hard nature of Troy with her love and compassion, providing shelter to her children from their father’s destructive behavior and legacy.

**Blues music, trains** — August Wilson says he uses the language and attitude of blues songs to inspire his plays and play characters. *Fences* is structured somewhat like a blues song. Characters repeat phrases like a blues band with a line of melody, similar to the role of repeated lyrics and melody of a blues song. The blues in *Fences* connects generations together and keeps alive a family’s roots and history beyond the grave.

Troy sings the song, “Please Mr. Engineer, let a man ride the line,” which echoes the pleas of a man begging a train engineer to let him ride, in hiding, for free. Especially during the Harlem Renaissance (the flourishing of African American artists, writers, poets, etc. in the first half of the Twentieth Century) and during slavery times, respectively, trains were common literary devices in African American literature and music. A character that rides a train or talks of trains, or even goes to a train station, came to represent change. Trains represent the coming or arrival of a major change in a character’s life.

Source: As described on Sparknotes
ELEMENTS OF PRODUCTION

Scene & Setting Info
(as written by the playwright)


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 at the 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.

SCENES

**ACT I**

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

**ACT II**

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

Photo source: From the _Pittsburgh Post-Gazette_ June 18, 2018 story of Urban Redevelopment Authority photos of buildings that were scheduled to be demolished in the 1950s to make way for the Civic Arena. This neighborhood served as the inspiration for Wilson’s _Fences_ setting. https://newsinteractive.post-gazette.com/lower_hill/
CONTEXT FOR THE PLAY

The Hill District

From the 1930s until the 1950s, the Hill District was known as the “crossroads of the world.” Music, art, culture and commerce thrived in Little Harlem. The Hill boasted the only all-black radio station, its own weekly newspaper (The Pittsburgh Courier), and a vibrantly active jazz scene. The photographer for The Pittsburgh Courier was Teenie Harris, whose work can still be seen today at the Carnegie Museum of Art. Neighborhood nightclub, The Crawford Grille, boasted such jazz greats as John Coltrane and Dizzy Gillespie. The owner of the club also owned one of Pittsburgh’s first and only negro league teams, The Pittsburgh Crawfords, which included famous players such as Satchel Paige and Josh Gibson. African American entrepreneur Madam C.J. Walker even opened a beauty parlor and school in The Hill. It seemed the Hill District was set to become one of the area’s strongest and most vibrant historical communities.

After World War II, the housing in the Hill was slated for redevelopment due to aging housing conditions. However, this process was not planned out well, and the lives of the local people were disrupted as the renewal got under way. Over 8000 residents (as well as 400 local businesses) were displaced, and the area’s access to the downtown economy was cut off. A new arena and parking lot were built in an area that predominantly black families had once called home.

The civil unrest and violence of the late 1960s added fuel to the fire, and soon The Hill had deteriorated into a shell of its former self. By 1990, 71 percent of the community’s residents and a majority of its businesses were gone. Vacant lots and decrepit buildings replaced the colorful and vibrant Hill that had once been such an integral part of the city of Pittsburgh.

However, the story is far from over. These days, the Hill can be seen garnering local attention as residents both old and young strive to preserve its culture. Public interest groups are working diligently to restore the Hill to its former glory and bring the neighborhood’s residents out of poverty. Despite the struggles of the past, the Hill District is looking toward the future — and we’re all a little bit brighter for it.

“Over 1,300 buildings were razed in the 1950s and ‘60s in the name of urban renewal. Roughly 80 blocks were cleared and 800 residents relocated to make way for the Pittsburgh Penguins’ Civic Arena, which itself was demolished in 2012.”

The Story of the Pittsburgh Neighborhood That Inspired “Fences” February 24, 2017, National Trust for Historic Preservation
CONTEXT FOR THE PLAY

A Civil Rights Timeline

The civil rights movement was an organized effort by black Americans to end racial discrimination and gain equal rights under the law. It began in the late 1940s and ended in the late 1960s (though the fight for equality did not end in the 1960s and continues to this day).

Let’s take a look at the timeline of the Civil Rights movement:

**July 26, 1948:** President Harry Truman issues an executive order to end segregation in the military.

**May 17, 1954:** *Brown v. Board of Education* is decided by the Supreme Court, ruling that segregation in public schools violated the 14th Amendment. This decision effectively ended racial segregation in public schools, however many schools remained segregated for years after.

Mother (Nettie Hunt) and daughter (Nickie) sit on steps of the Supreme Court building on May 18, 1954, the day following the Court’s historic decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Nettie is holding a newspaper with the headline “High Court Bans Segregation in Public Schools.” Photo source: Library of Congress

**August 28, 1955:** Emmitt Till, an African American fourteen-year old, is found brutally murdered for allegedly flirting with a white woman a few days prior. His assailants are the white woman’s husband and brother, but they are acquitted by an all-white jury.

**December 1, 1955:** Rosa Parks refuses to give up her seat to a white man on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She is arrested and fined. Her defiant stance prompts a year-long Montgomery bus boycott in which 99% of African Americans do not use the municipal bus system, resulting in the loss of thousands of dollars of revenue and eventually leading to a Supreme Court ruling that deems segregated busing as unconstitutional.

Rosa Parks being fingerprinted in Montgomery, AL, in 1956. Photo source: Underwood Archives/Getty Images

**January 10-11, 1957:** Sixty black pastors and civil rights leaders from several southern states — including Martin Luther King, Jr. — meet in Atlanta, Georgia to coordinate nonviolent protests against racial discrimination and segregation.

**September 4, 1957:** Nine black students known as the “Little Rock Nine,” are blocked from integrating into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. President Dwight D. Eisenhower eventually sends federal troops to escort the students, however, they continued to be harassed.

Photo source: “The Scream Image.” The Associated Press named this image one of the top 100 photographs of the twentieth century. Taken Sep. 4, 1957

**September 9, 1957:** Eisenhower signs the Civil Rights Act of 1957 into law to help protect voter rights. The law allows federal prosecution of those who suppress another’s right to vote.

**February 1, 1960:** Four college students in Greensboro, North Carolina refuse to leave a Woolworth’s “whites only” lunch counter without being served in a non-violent demonstration that sparks similar “sit-ins” throughout the city and in other states. This eventually leads to the department store and other businesses in the South to end their policies of racial segregation.
CONTEXT FOR THE PLAY

**June 11, 1963:** Governor George C. Wallace stands in a doorway at the University of Alabama to block two black students from registering. The standoff continues until President John F. Kennedy sends the National Guard to the campus.

Former Alabama Gov. George C. Wallace vowed “segregation forever” and blocked the door to keep blacks from enrolling at the University of Alabama on June 11, 1963, in Tuscaloosa, AL, while being confronted by Deputy U.S. Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach.

**Photo source:** File/USN&WR

**August 28, 1963:** Approximately 250,000 people take part in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. Martin Luther King gives the closing address in front of the Lincoln Memorial and states, “I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal.’”

**Photo source:** William Lovelace/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

**September 15, 1963:** A bomb at 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama kills four young girls and injures several other people prior to Sunday services. The bombing fuels angry protests.

**July 2, 1964:** President Lyndon B. Johnson signs the **Civil Rights Act of 1964** into law, preventing employment discrimination due to race, color, sex, religion or national origin. **Title VII** of the Act establishes the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) to help prevent workplace discrimination.

**February 21, 1965:** Black religious leader Malcolm X is assassinated during a rally by members of the Nation of Islam.

**March 7, 1965:** In the **Selma to Montgomery Marches**, around 600 civil rights marchers walk to Selma, Alabama to Montgomery — the state’s capital — in protest of black voter suppression. Local police block and brutally attack them. After successfully fighting in court for their right to march, Martin Luther King and other civil rights leaders lead two more marches and finally reach Montgomery on March 25.

**Photo source:** William Lovelace/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

**August 6, 1965:** President Johnson signs the **Voting Rights Act of 1965** to prevent the use of literacy tests as a voting requirement. It also allowed federal examiners to review voter qualifications and federal observers to monitor polling places. “The vote is the most powerful instrument ever devised by man for breaking down injustice and destroying the terrible walls which imprison men because they are different from other men.” - Johnson

**April 4, 1968:** Martin Luther King, Jr. is assassinated on the balcony of his hotel room in Memphis, Tennessee. James Earl Ray is convicted of the murder in 1969.

**April 11, 1968:** President Johnson signs the **Civil Rights Act of 1968**, also known as the **Fair Housing Act**, providing equal housing opportunity regardless of race, religion or national origin.

This material is sourced and adapted from History.com: https://www.history.com/topics/civil-rights-movement/civil-rights-movement-timeline
CONTEXT FOR THE PLAY

The Color Line

By the 1940s, organized baseball had been racially segregated for many years. The black press and some of their white colleagues had long campaigned for the integration of baseball; World War II experiences gave rise to more questions regarding segregation practices.

In addition to racial intolerance, economic factors and other complex issues contributed to segregation in baseball. Team owners knew that if baseball were integrated, the Negro Leagues would probably not survive losing their best players to the majors, and many Negro League players would lose their livelihoods. Many owners of major league teams rented their stadiums to Negro League teams when their own teams were on the road, and were concerned they’d lose significant rental revenue. Some owners also thought that a white audience would be reluctant to attend games with black players. Others saw the addition of black players as a way to attract larger audiences, both white and black, and sell more tickets.

Although several people tried to end segregation within major league baseball, no one succeeded until the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers, Branch Rickey, decided to take action. In 1942, Branch Rickey joined the Dodgers and quietly began plans to bring black players to the team. The first black baseball player to cross the “color line” would be subjected to intense public scrutiny, and Rickey knew that the player would have to be more than a talented athlete to succeed. He would also have to be a strong person who could agree to avoid open confrontation when subjected to hostility and insults, at least for a few years. In 1945, when Rickey approached Jackie Robinson, baseball was being proposed as one of the first areas of American society to integrate.

The player who would break the color line, Jack (John) Roosevelt Robinson, was born in Cairo, Georgia, on January 31, 1919. His mother moved the family to Pasadena, California, in 1920, and Robinson attended John Muir Technical High School and Pasadena Community College before transferring to the University of California, Los Angeles. An outstanding athlete, he lettered in four sports at UCLA — baseball, football, basketball, and track — and excelled in others, such as swimming and tennis. Consequently, he had experience playing integrated sports.

Jackie Robinson of the Brooklyn Dodgers, posed and ready to swing, 1954. Photo source: Library of Congress, Photo by Bob Sandberg, Look photographer, restoration by Adam Cuerden

Robinson showed an early interest in civil rights in the Army. He was drafted in 1942 and served on bases in Kansas and Texas. With help from boxer Joe Louis, he succeeded in opening an Officer Candidate School to black soldiers. Soon after, Robinson became a second lieutenant. At Fort Hood, Texas, Robinson faced a court martial for refusing to obey an order to move to the back of a bus. The order was a violation of Army regulations, and he was exonerated. Shortly after leaving the Army in 1944, Robinson joined the Kansas City Monarchs, a leading team in the Negro Leagues.

After scouting many players from the Negro Leagues, Branch Rickey met with Jackie Robinson at the Brooklyn Dodgers office in August, 1945. At the meeting, Rickey revealed that he wanted Robinson to play for the major league Dodgers. On October 23, 1945, Jackie Robinson officially signed the contract. Rickey soon put other black players under contract, but the spotlight stayed on Robinson. After a successful season with the minor league Montreal Royals in 1946, Robinson officially broke the major league color line when he put on a Dodgers uniform, number 42, in April 1947.

This material is sourced and adapted from the article “Breaking the Color Line: 1940-1946”
The Blues

The Blues is a music genre that has deep roots in American history, particularly African American history. This style of music originated on Southern plantations; its inventors were enslaved people, ex-enslaved, and the descendants of the enslaved. The music evolved from African spirituals, chants, work songs, field hollers, rural fife and drum music, and revivalist hymns.

During the middle to late 1800s, the South was home to hundreds of influential bluesmen who helped to shape the genre. The legacy of these early Blues pioneers can still be heard in 1920s and ‘30s recordings from Mississippi, Louisiana, Texas, Georgia, and other Southern states. Many of the earliest Blues musicians incorporated a wide assortment that included traditional folk songs, vaudeville music, and minstrel tunes.

The Blues was performed in a variety of styles. Well-known Blues pioneers from the 1920s usually performed solo with just a guitar, though occasionally they teamed up with one or more fellow bluesmen to perform in the plantation camps, rural juke joints, and rambling shacks of the Deep South. Musicians often played “tent shows,” traveling around the country and performing alongside circus acts, medicine shows, and musical companies.

The music began to evolve once the Blues made their way up the Mississippi River. When the music moved to the cities and other locales, it took on various regional characteristics — hence the St. Louis Blues, Memphis Blues, Louisiana Blues, and so on. The electrified sounds of the Blues in Chicago was first brought about by John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters, famous bluesmen who also added drums and piano in the 1940s. That same decade, the Blues gave birth to rhythm and blues (R&B) and rock ‘n’ roll.

Today, there are many different shades of the blues. Forms include:

- **Traditional country blues**: A general term that describes the rural Blues of the Mississippi Delta, the Piedmont and other rural locales.
- **Jump blues**: A danceable amalgam of swing and Blues and a precursor to R&B. Jump Blues was pioneered by Louis Jordan.
- **Boogie-woogie**: A piano-based Blues popularized by Meade Lux Lewis, Albert Ammons, and Pete Johnson, and derived from barrelhouse and ragtime.
- **Chicago blues**: Delta blues electrified.
- **Cool blues**: A sophisticated piano-based form that owes much to jazz.
- **West Coast blues**: Popularized mainly by Texas musicians who moved to California. West Coast Blues is heavily influenced by the swing beat.
- **The Texas blues, Memphis blues, and St. Louis blues**: Consist of a wide variety of subgenres.
- **Louisiana blues**: Characterized by a swampy guitar or harmonica sound with lots of echo, while Kansas City Blues is jazz oriented — think Count Basie. There is also the British Blues, a rock-blues hybrid pioneered by John Mayall, Peter Green, and Eric Clapton.
- **New Orleans blues**: Largely piano-based, with the exception of some talented guitarists such as Guitar Slim and Snooks Eaglin.

Sourced from *A Brief History of the Blues* by Ed Kopp.
More About the Century Cycle

August Wilson’s Century Cycle is considered to be one of his greatest accomplishments. It helped to democratize the United States’ theatrical canon, paving the road for a greater diversity of voices to be heard, and giving people a realistic depiction of African American life across the twentieth century.

The Century Cycle is made up of ten plays that document the hopes, dreams, and struggles of African Americans, and each play pertains to a different decade of the twentieth century. All plays take place in Pittsburgh’s Hill District, where August Wilson grew up. The cycle is also known as “The Pittsburgh Cycle.”

The Century Cycle plays are listed below and are followed by the year he wrote them, the decade they reflect, and a short synopsis.

Gem of the Ocean (2003) 1900s
Taking place in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, this play is about Aunt Ester, a well-known 285-year-old wise woman of the town whose home has become a sanctuary for the troubled and lost. Onto the scene walks a man who has fled from Alabama who has come to Aunt Ester’s because of the tales he has heard of her soul-cleansing powers. Aunt Ester helps guide him through a spiritual journey towards redemption and self-discovery.

Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1988) 1910s
Taking place in Pittsburgh at the boarding house of Seth and Bertha Holly, this play is about the lives of a few freed former enslaved African Americans. While slavery is almost half a century in the past, it lives on vividly in their memories, including Harold Loomis, a man who returns to the city in search of his wife. Loomis is unable to fully embrace the future or release the past; he is haunted by the memory of bounty hunter Joe Turner, a man who had illegally enslaved him. The search for his wife brings him to Seth and Bertha’s boarding house with his young daughter, Zonia, where “conjure man” Bynum shows him that in all truth, he is searching for himself.

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (1984) 1920s
This is the only play in the Century Cycle not set in Pittsburgh, instead taking place in a recording studio in Chicago. The story takes place over the course of an afternoon, as the legendary blues singer, Ma Rainey, and a group of musicians record several songs. Much of the play takes the form of discussions and arguments among the four musicians, each of whom brings his own perspective to questions of prejudice and the problems facing black people in American society. Their songs are jeopardized by the ambitions and decisions of her band.

The Piano Lesson (1990) 1930s
Taking place in Pittsburgh at the home of Berniece, her brother Boy Willie, has come to town with an ambitious plan to buy land in Mississippi- the same land on which their family’s ancestors served as enslaved people. In order for Boy Willie to purchase the land, he needs his sister to agree to sell the old piano sitting in her living room so that she can split the profit with him, allowing Boy Willie the rest of the money he needs to secure the land. They clash over whether or not they should sell the ancient piano which Berniece considers a sacred relic that holds their family’s history, from slavery to emancipation and Reconstruction.

Seven Guitars (1995) 1940s
Taking place in Pittsburgh, this play starts and ends with the funeral of Floyd, and then flashes back in time and tracks the events that lead to his death. Floyd has made a lot of mistakes and he sets off on a journey to right his wrongs and prove to his community that he has changed. As soon as everyone is convinced and it seems as though things are finally going his way, Floyd is killed, and everyone’s world comes crashing down once more. Floyd, as well as the other men in the play, grapple with what it means to be a man, and all of the characters struggle with how to get ahead in a world that seems to be set against everything they are.

Fences (1987) 1950s
Taking place in Pittsburgh’s Hill District, this play follows the story of Troy Maxson, a man in his fifties who struggles to provide for his wife and son as a garbage collector. Set in a time when the Civil Rights Movement has still not come to fruition, Troy is jaded with the cards that have been dealt to him in life; this causes a lot of turmoil and frustration, especially in his relationships, as the characters question dreams deferred.

(Continued)
MORE ABOUT THE CENTURY CYCLE

_Two Trains Running_ (1991)
1960s
Taking place in Pittsburgh during the Civil Rights Movement, this play is set entirely within a popular and much-loved soul food restaurant, Lee’s. The owner, Memphis, built his fortune for himself and values hard work, determination, and honesty, but at the play’s outset, he must consider selling his beloved restaurant due to urban planning taking over so much of his neighborhood.

_Jitney_ (1982)
1970s
Taking place in Pittsburgh’s Hill District in a jitney cab station, this play is set during Pittsburgh’s period of so-called “urban renewal.” As the city tries to shut down businesses -- including the cab station -- to make way for new building, we meet five ‘jitney’ cab drivers struggling to survive. This play puts human faces to the process of gentrification taking over the United States as they cling to a nostalgic past, while reaching for an unknown future, and all the while posing questions about how to heal past wounds.

_King Hedley II_ (1999)
1980s
Taking place in the Pittsburgh Hill District, this play is often considered the most tragic of the Century Cycle. The story follows King Hedley II, an ex-con who is desperately trying to start anew. Now that he has returned to Pittsburgh from prison, his desire is to support himself by selling refrigerators in order to earn enough money to open a video store. Set during the Reagan administration, this play comments on the supply-side economics theories of the day, examining whether their stated aim of providing trickle-down benefits to all Americans truly improved the lot of urban African Americans.

_Radio Golf_ (2005)
1990s
Taking place in Pittsburgh, this play follows a man named Harmond Wilks on his quest to become the first black mayor of Pittsburgh and revive his childhood neighborhood, the old and devastated Hill District. He has planned a redevelopment project that will bring in a new high-rise apartment building and chain stores. Wilks envisions this as a great plan to restore his childhood home, but as the play progresses and he meets characters from the past, his eyes are opened to the possibility that what he thought would be a gift to the future might actually be hurting the district’s history.

The plays are not connected in the manner of a serial story but characters do repeatedly appear at different stages of their lives and the offspring of previous characters also feature; the figure of Aunt Ester features most often in the cycle.
PRE-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS:

1. August Wilson’s Century Cycle is a ten-play series that tells the story of the African American experience throughout the 20th century, primarily in the Hill District of Pittsburgh. *Fences* takes place in the 1950s, the center decade of Wilson’s play cycle and the heart of the Civil Rights Movement in America.

   • Why do you think Wilson felt inspired to create a play cycle that portrays the African American experience throughout the entire 20th Century?
   • Based on the title of the play and the knowledge of the social and historical context of the play, what predictions can you make about the characters and plot?

2. In *Fences*, August Wilson explores family relationships and the responsibilities of parents and children. According to August Wilson, “One of the questions [in *Fences*] was ‘Are we our fathers’ sons?’ And if in fact we are our fathers’ sons, must we become our fathers? Are the tools that they have given us to participate in the world...are they sufficient for our survival and progress?”

   • What tools do you think a parent/guardian must pass on to their children? Why may it be difficult for a parent/guardian to provide these tools?
   • How can the habits or past of a parent/guardian impact the development of a child?
   • Have you experienced a conflict between you and your parent/guardian? How has this affected your relationship? Think back to the comparison between your childhood and your parent’s childhood. Do you think these differences may impact your relationship?

3. The physical structure of a fence provides a variety of uses. Brainstorm and discuss as a class different symbolic meanings of a fence (i.e. separation, ownership, privacy). How do you predict these different symbols may relate to the show?

   • If you hear the term “fence” what image comes to mind? What thoughts or feelings do you associate with fences? How does the meaning of “fence” change depending on the context?

POST-PERFORMANCE QUESTIONS:

1. After seeing the play, read the following quote by August Wilson:

   “The suffering is only a part of black history. What I want to do is place the culture of black America on stage, to demonstrate that it has the ability to offer sustenance, so that when you leave your parents’ house, you are not in the world alone. You have something that is yours, you have a ground to stand on, and you have a viewpoint, and you have a way of proceeding in the world that has been developed by your ancestors.”

   • How does Wilson “place the culture of black America on stage” in *Fences*? Do you think *Fences* focused more on this culture or “the suffering” of Black America?
   • How does Wilson incorporate the social and historical context of the 1950s into the relationships of the Maxson family? Topics to consider: credit cards, jazz, workplace discrimination, war, racial migration.
   • Compare and contrast Troy and Cory’s childhoods. How does the historical culture impact their lives?
   • Consider your parent/guardian’s childhood. What was society like during that time? Was it different than society is now? How does your childhood compare? How do you think your generation’s children’s childhood will compare to yours?

2. What qualities would you use to describe Troy Maxson as a man? As a father? As a husband? As a friend? What actions, speech, or physical choices revealed or supported these qualities?

   • Did any of the characters transform throughout the course of the play? If yes, how and why did they transform? Was the transformation positive or negative? If no, do you think it is good they did not transform? What do you think prevented them from transforming?
   • How did the relationships between characters progress through the play? Did your opinions towards any of the characters change from beginning to end?
   • How did the conflict between Troy and his children affect their development? Does Cory become his father? What about Lyons?

Activities originally created for McCarter Theatre production of *Fences*
CLAS SROOM ACTIVITIES

Post-performance questions continued

3. Do you think the title *Fences* accurately describes this show? What fences exists between characters? Which fences are the most powerful in the show, the symbolic or concrete/physical?
   - How can a fence reach beyond a physical purpose? Can a fence be invisible? How can you build your own fences in your life? Are there fences in your life that you do not control?
   - The characters in *Fences* articulate contrasting opinions on the purpose of a fence. Do you think they are used to keep people out or keep people in? Why?

4. Read August Wilson’s quote on the universality of theater:

   “Theater asserts that all of human life is universal. Love, Honor, Duty, Betrayal belong and pertain to every culture or race. The way they are acted out on the playing field may be different, but...it is theater that illuminates and confers upon the universal the ability to speak for all men.”

   - Do you agree with this statement? How does Wilson portray the universality of the human race in *Fences*? Do you think people of a different culture and time period could connect with the characters of *Fences*? If yes, how? If no, why not?

More questions to consider and discuss

What is the significance of the play’s title and it being set in 1957?

What is the significance of baseball in the play?

Is Troy Maxson a heroic character? A tragic character? If so, what are his tragic flaws?

How do “fences” (real and metaphorical) create conflict between characters in the play? Who builds these emotional “fences”? Are “fences” taken down?

How does Troy Maxson set up the direction of the play’s plot; what events does he reference or allude to that will create a struggle for him throughout the course of the play?

How do the characters change throughout the play? Who changes the most; the least?

Do Troy’s actions cause changes in the other characters? Is he changed by other characters’ actions?

Towards the end of the play, what is the significance of Cory singing the song “Old Blue” that Troy sang earlier in the play?

What happens to Gabe at the end of the play?

Does the set look realistic? Can you tell the characters’ standard of living based on the set?

How is music used in the play — both sound design and by the actors?

Discuss the historical events and subjects referenced in the play that affect its characters. For example: racial integration — in baseball and in the workplace, urban renewal/redevelopment, World War II.

Compare Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* with August Wilson’s depiction of the American dream.
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1
Create a New Cycle
August Wilson died months after the opening night of the 10th play of the cycle. If Wilson were alive today to create a new cycle, how would he portray 2000-2009 or 2010-2019?

Break into groups of three or four and discuss the major social and historical traits of the last decade and this decade (Students may choose which decade they would like to be the focus of their cycle.)

August Wilson focused on the Hill District of Pittsburgh, so we encourage you to focus on the neighborhood where you live. What do you see in your community on a day to day basis? What intrigues you in your community?

Create a brief “pitch” for your play. This pitch should include a title, character descriptions, and plot outline (rising action, conflict, resolution).

Reminders: Wilson strived to portray more than “suffering” on stage. Suffering may be an instrumental component in the community, but outside of the suffering, what are the lives and relationships within the community? Characters make the story. Who are your characters? What do they want? What are their relationships to each other? Allow the characters to inform the direction of the story.

ACTIVITY 2
Eulogy
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, independently decide who you believe would deliver Troy’s eulogy. From the perspective of that character, try to 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, have a class discussion about “eulogy” as a genre of writing. Once everyone understands the format and concept of a eulogy, you may work independently to write a eulogy for Troy from the perspective of the character you chose. Once completed, the eulogies may be shared in groups or before the class.

ACTIVITY 3
Music of a Character
Music shares the universal quality Wilson discusses of theater. Listeners often connect to music to the point where they feel the songs tell their personal story.

Choose a character (or two!) and create a playlist of music. What would this character listen to on a good day? On a bad day?

Consider specific moments in the show. What music would the character listen to at that time? Be sure to include a lyric or stanza from each song to explain why this song fits the character.

You can work in partners and report to the class once completed.

Reminders: This activity will require stepping into the shoes of a character. The music people listen to can reflect their innermost thoughts, therefore you should deeply consider the experiences of each character and how this may affect their thoughts.

The music does not need to be music of the 1950s! You may connect the characters to the music of today.
Wilson, on the play:
“In Fences they see a garbage man, a person they don’t really look at, although they may see a garbage man every day…. This black garbage man’s life is very similar to their own, he is affected by the same things — love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty.”

Wilson, on how he began writing the play:
“Fences actually started with Troy standing in the yard with the baby in his arms, and the first line I wrote was ‘I’m standing out here in the yard with my daughter in my arms. She’s just a wee bitty little ole thing. She don’t understand about grownups’ business, and she ain’t got no mama.’ I didn’t know who he was talking to. I said, ‘O.K., he’s talking to his wife. O.K., why is he telling her this?’ I thought, ‘I can write one of those plays where you have a big character and everything revolves around him’…. In Fences I wanted to show Troy as very responsible. He did not leave. He held a job. He fathered three kids by three different women, due to the circumstances of his life, and he was responsible toward all of them.”

Wilson, on the character of Troy Maxson:
“I think what impressed me most about Troy was his willingness to engage life, to live it zestfully and fully despite the particulars of his past, despite the way his mother abandoned him, the way he was put out of the house by his father at fourteen, the way he spent fifteen years in the penitentiary — none of that broke his spirit.”

Wilson, on a writing exercise he used with playwriting students:
“I ask them to invent a painting and then describe it. That word-painting becomes the set description, but they don’t know it…. I ask the students what the people in their paintings say and how they talk, and gradually they see that characters characterize themselves through their speech.”

NOTE: Several of Wilson’s own plays found their origins in works of visual art; Joe Turner’s Come and Gone and The Piano Lesson were both inspired by Romare Bearden’s collages. In the case of Fences, Wilson reflected on a Bearden 1969 work titled “Continuities.”
RESOURCES

AT THE LIBRARY

Conversations with August Wilson
by Jackson R. Bryer (Editor), Mary C. Hartig (Editor)

I Ain’t Sorry for Nothin’ I Done: August Wilson’s Process of Playwriting
by Joan Herrington

August Wilson’s Fences: A Reference Guide
by Sandra G. Shannon

From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans
by John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss Jr.

WEB

New York Times' topics page on August Wilson,

Timeline of Wilson’s life from the August Wilson Center for African American Culture website:
http://www.augustwilsoncenter.org/aacc_pdf/AugustWilsonTimeline.pdf

A collection of articles about Wilson and his plays:
http://www.augustwilson.net/


SOURCES CITED:


https://www.sparknotes.com/drama/fences/characters/

https://www.pittsburghbeautiful.com/

https://www.history.com/topics/civil-rights-movement


http://www.thepeoplehistory.com/50smusic.html


http://bluesjunctionproductions.com/the_top_fifty_influential_blues_artists_of_all_time
ABOUT US

Virginia Repertory Theatre is a nonprofit, professional theatre company and the result of the 2012 merger of Barksdale Theatre and Theatre IV. With a budget of $5.6 million, four distinct venues, an educational touring arm, and an annual audience over 530,000, Virginia Rep is the largest professional theatre and one of the largest performing arts organizations in Central Virginia. We are dedicated to the development and production of new plays, and we seek outside producing collaboration to ensure the play has a life beyond its development and production at Virginia Rep.

For over 60 years, Virginia Rep has served Virginia’s adults, children, families and schools and contributed to the cultural, educational, and economic life of our city and region.

Our Signature Season operates under an annual contract with Actors Equity Association.

Virginia Rep is a member of TCG and National New Play Network NNPA.

MISSION

Virginia Repertory Theatre creates professional productions of the great comedies, dramas, and musicals – past, present and future. We embrace the art form in its entirety, presenting plays of all genres and national origins, serving an audience of all ages and backgrounds. In keeping with the legacies of Barksdale and Theatre IV, the hallmark of our nonprofit company is community engagement. To that end, we seek national caliber excellence in the arts, education, children’s health, and community leadership.