



AUGUST WILSON'S

# FENCES

Written by **August Wilson** | Directed by **Lou Bellamy**  
 A Co-Production with Arizona Theatre Company and Indiana Repertory Theatre  
**April 26 – May 22, 2016 | The Quadracci Powerhouse**  
 Executive Producers: James E. and Mary K. Braza  
 Associate Producers: Carol and Rob Manegold & Catherine and Buddy Robinson

This Teacher's Guide is designed to be used in the classroom along with The Rep's Play Guide for *Fences*. These are some suggested activities for your classroom. The Play Guide is available online at <http://www.milwaukeerep.com/On-Stage/2015-16-Season/Fences-PlayGuide/>

## AUGUST WILSON'S 20TH CENTURY CYCLE

### DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- August Wilson's 20th 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 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 & historical context of the play, what predictions can you make about the characters and plot?

### DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- After seeing the play, read August Wilson's quote (*on the right*) to the students. 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?

## FAMILY & COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

### DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- 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?

### ACTIVITY: 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.

Read more about August Wilson's Play Cycle in the Play Guide on Page 6.

## TEACHER'S GUIDE

### CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

Written by: **Amanda Garrigan, Education Resident**

Edited by: **Kelsey Ingle, Education Coordinator; Hope Parow, Education Associate** and **Jenny Toutant, Education Director**

### SUGGESTED TEACHING TOPICS

- 1.) August Wilson's 20th Century Cycle
- 2.) Family & Responsibility
- 3.) Fences: A Metaphor
- 4.) Universality of Theater

See Play Guide page 5 to learn more about the "Hill District"

### ACTIVITY: Create a New Cycle

August Wilson died months after the opening night of the 10th play of the cycle. If Wilson was alive today to create a new cycle, how would he portray 2000-2009 or 2010-2019? Break students into groups of 3 or 4 and guide them to 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, encourage students to focus on their neighborhood in Milwaukee. What do they see in their community on a day to day basis? What intrigues them in their community? Students should create a brief "pitch" for their 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.

**Pitch:** to present or advertise especially in a high-pressure way

"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."

-August Wilson

### DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- 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? Does Lyons? Does Troy?

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.

# FENCES: A METAPHOR

## DISCUSS: Pre-Show Questions

- 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?

## DISCUSS: Post-Show Questions

- 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?
- 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?

## UNIVERSALITY OF THEATER:

### DISCUSS: Post-Show Question

- Read August Wilson's quote on the universality of theater (below). 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?

### ACTIVITY: What's (s)he listening to? 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. Students should 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? The students should have a lyric or stanza from each song to explain why this song fits the character. Students may choose to work in partners and report out to the class once completed.

**Reminders:** This activity will require stepping into the shoes of a character. The music people listen can reflect their inner most thoughts, therefore students 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! The students may connect the characters to the music of today.

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.  
-August Wilson



David Alan Anderson and Marcus Naylor. Photo by Tim Fuller



Edgar Sanchez and Kim Staunton. Photo by Tim Fuller

## STANDARDS

### Common Core State Standards:

#### English Language Arts

**RL.6-10.1** LITERACY COMPREHENSION

**RL 6-12.3** ANALYZE DIALOGUE

**SL.8-12.1** COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSIONS

**WL.8-12.3** WRITING A NARRATIVE

**SL.6-12.4** PRESENTATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS



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