60 YEARS
trinity rep

August Wilson's FENCES

DIRECTED BY

CHRISTOPHER WINDOM

Project Discovery Study Guide | Created by Am Wyckoff & the Education Department

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Created by Am Wyckoff & the Education Department

Study Guide and artwork designed by Jessica Thomas and Nikki Leite

INTRO

UNIT ONE: BACKGROUND

UNIT TWO: ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

UNIT THREE: ENTERING THE TEXT

THEATER ETIQUETTE

Please read carefully and go over with your classes before the show.

caption here please

TEACHERS:

Speaking to your students about theater etiquette is ESSENTIAL. Students should be aware that this is a live performance and that they should not talk during the show. If you do nothing else to prepare your students to see the play, please take some time to talk to them about theater etiquette to help the students better appreciate their experience. It will enhance their enjoyment of the show and allow other audience members to enjoy the experience. The questions below can help guide the discussions. Thank you for your help and enjoy the show!

ETIQUETTE:

What is the role of the audience in a live performance? How is it different from seeing a film? Why is it important not to chew gum or eat popcorn at a live theater performance? Why shouldn't you talk? What can happen in live theater that cannot happen in cinema?

Reiterate that students may not talk during the performance. Please make sure all cell phones and alarms are turned off. Recording devices and cameras are strictly prohibited. Students may not leave the building during intermission. Talking is not allowed during the performance, but your laughter, applause, and attention are welcome and greatly appreciated!

Image Credits: Nicholas Byers (left) as Cory, and Rodney Witherspoon II (right) as Lyons in rehearsal for 2024's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Marisa Lenardson.

QUESTIONS BEFORE SEEING THE SHOW AT TRINITY REP:

What are the differences between live theater and cinema? (Two-dimensional vs. three-dimensional; larger than life on the screen vs. life-size; recorded vs. live, etc.) Discuss the nature of film as mass-produced, versus the one-time only nature of live performances. Talk about original art works vs. posters. Which do they feel is more valuable? Why? What is the responsibility of an audience when watching a play? What is the responsibility of an audience when watching a Shakespeare play?

OBSERVATION #1

When you get into the theater, look around. What do you see? Observe the lighting instruments around the room and on the ceiling. Look at the set. Does it look realistic or abstract? Try to guess how the set will be used during the show.

OBSERVATION #2

Discuss the elements that go into producing a live performance: the lights, set, props, costumes, and stage direction. All the people involved in the "behind the scenes" elements of the theater are working backstage as the play unfolds before the students' eyes. Tell them to be aware of this as they watch the show. Observe the lighting cues. How do special effects work? How do the actors change costumes so fast?

Pay attention to when you're excited about something on stage. What excited you? Pay attention to when you're bored. Why were you bored? What would you have done differently to make the play more interesting? Actors in a live performance are very attuned to the audience and are interested in the students' reactions to the play. Ask the students to write letters to the actors about the characters they played and to ask questions of the actors. Send these letters to: Trinity Repertory Company, c/o Education, 201 Washington St., Providence, RI 02903 or email to: **Education@TrinityRep.com.**

USING THIS STUDY GUIDE IN YOUR CLASSROOM

A Letter from the Education Department

Welcome to Trinity Rep and the 57th season of Project Discovery! The education staff at Trinity Rep had a lot of fun preparing this study guide and hope that the activities included will help you incorporate the play into your academic study. It is also structured to help you to introduce performance into your classroom through the following elements:

- **Community Building in Your Classroom**
- **Inspiration and Background on the Artist**
- **Entering and Comprehending Text**
- **Creating Text for Performance**
- **Performing in Your Class**
- **Reflecting on Your Performance**

Trinity Rep's Project Discovery student matinees help high school students in the following common core areas (for more information on the National Core Arts Standards, visit **www.NationalArtsStandards.org**):

- Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10 topics, texts, and issues, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively (CCS. ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-10.1)
- Analyze how complex characters (e.g., those with multiple or conflicting motivations) develop over the course of a text, interact with other characters, and advance the plot or develop the theme (CCSS.RL.910.3)
- Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone (CCSS. RL.9-10.44)
- Investigate how cultural perspectives, community ideas, and personal beliefs impact a drama/theatre work (TH: Cn10.1.I.)
- Analyze and compare artistic choices developed from personal experiences in multiple drama/theatre works (TH: Re8.1.I.)
- Respond to what is seen, felt, and heard in a drama/theatre work to develop criteria for artistic choices (TH: Re7.1.I.)
- Evaluate and analyze problems and situations in a drama/theatre work from an audience perspective (TH: Re9.1.I)

Enjoy the show!

Unit 01 BACKGROUND

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

By Joi Wright

Note on Language: This production will include the original language of the play as written, including the use of the N-word. If you have not read the full play with the class, please make sure you prepare your students before you come to see the play. If you're concerned about language, please make sure you or a representative of your staff attends the teacher preview.

Playwright August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1945. He was the fourth of six children. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was of African-American heritage. His father was a German immigrant named Frederick Kittel. As a child, August attended St. Richard's Parochial School. When his parents divorced, Kittel, his mother, and his siblings moved from the poor Bedford Avenue area of Pittsburgh to the mostly white neighborhood of Oakland. After facing the relentless bigotry of his classmates at Central Catholic High School, he transferred to Connelly Vocational High School, and later to Gladstone High School. When he was 15 years old, Wilson pursued an independent education at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, where he would earn his high school diploma.

Following his father's death in 1965, 20-year-old Kittel adopted the pen name "August Wilson," paying homage to his mother, declaring himself a poet. In 1968, Wilson and a friend, Rob Penny, co-founded the Black Horizon Theater. The following year, Wilson married Brenda Burton. The couple welcomed a daughter, Sakina, in 1970; they divorced two years later. Wilson remained primarily focused on succeeding as a poet until moving to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978.

August Wilson wrote his first notable play in 1979, *Jitney*, earning a fellowship

THE CENTURY CYCLE

Wilson's American Century Cycle is made up of nine plays, one set in each decade of the 1900s. He wrote these plays between 1982-2005. The plays include:

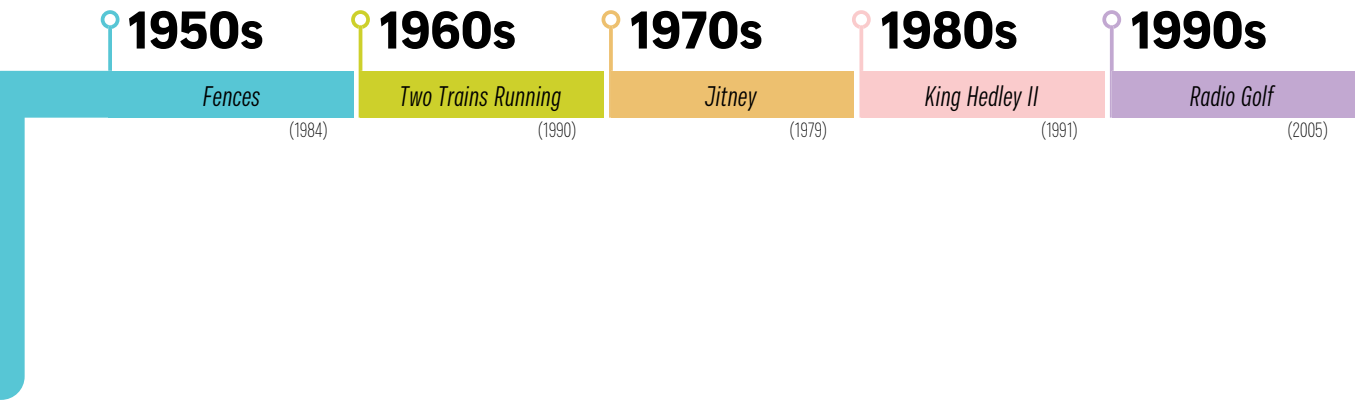
1900s	1910s	1920s	1930s	1940s
Gem of the Ocean (2002)	*Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984)	*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982)	*The Piano Lesson* (1986)	*Seven Guitars* (1995)

at the Minneapolis Playwright Center. In 1981 Wilson married his second wife Judy Oliver. The following year, his new play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, was accepted at the Eugene O'Neill Playwright's Conference. The year 1982 was particularly fruitful for Wilson, as it marked his introduction to Lloyd Richards, who went on to direct Wilson's first six Broadway plays.

Wilson's play *Fences* premiered on Broadway in 1987, earning the playwright his first Pulitzer Prize as well as a Tony Award. Set in the 1950s, *Fences* explored the themes of the ever-evolving black experience and race relations in America. *Fences* was the sixth of the playwright's 10-part series called The American Century Cycle, also known as The Pittsburgh Cycle, which defined each "part" by decade. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the second part in the cycle, opened on Broadway in 1988. Wilson divorced Judy Oliver in 1990. He took home another Pulitzer Prize that same year, this time for *The Piano Lesson*, following its Broadway premiere. A collection of Wilson's work, titled *Three Plays*, was published in book form in 1991. The following year brought the Broadway premiere of *Two Trains Running*.

In 1994, Wilson married for the third time to a costume designer named Constanza Romero. *Seven Guitars* made its way to the Broadway stage two years later, followed by the birth of Wilson's and Romero's daughter, Azula, in 1997. *King Hedley II* made its Broadway debut in 2001, and *Gem of the Ocean* premiered in Chicago roughly a year later. In 2003, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was revived on Broadway. *Gem of the Ocean* premiered on Broadway in 2004, where it had a run of 72 performances. August Wilson died of liver cancer on October 2, 2005, in Seattle, Washington. His new play, *Radio Golf*, had opened in Los Angeles, California, just a few months earlier.

You can read some illustrative quotes about August Wilson on this page from the August Wilson African American Cultural Center: **https://awaacc.org/about/about-august**.



All but one of these plays, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* are set in the Hill District, where Wilson grew up. Characters reappear throughout the Cycle, but its stories are not necessarily directly connected. Ford's Theater writes that, "Wilson's plays have contributed tremendously to the documentation of previously marginalized African-American histories, preserving the American experience while allowing it to come alive on stage." You can explore synopses of each of the plays of the Century Cycle at this page from the August Wilson African American Cultural Center here: https://awaacc.org/american-century-cycle.

Image Credits: Nicholas Byers as Cory in 2024's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Marisa Lenardson.

VIEW FROM THE HILL, PITTSBURGH

By Joi Wright

The Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania attracts people from all over the world for its art, culture, history, and attractions — one being the home of playwright August Wilson.

Wilson was born and raised in the present Crawford-Roberts neighborhood, known as the lower Hill District before the 20th century. Even though the playwright and his family moved out of the Hill District by the time he turned 13, he still considered it home. In later years, Wilson paid homage to his home by setting nine of the 10 plays in his American Century Cycle there.

A collection of historically African American neighborhoods, the Hill District was made up of three areas: lower, middle, and upper. Early in the 19th century, the neighborhood contained country estates, working farms, coal mines, and a village of black freedmen. By 1929, the Hill District was populated by many ethnic groups and was divided into areas that reflected the ethnic makeup of that neighborhood. Some of these areas were called Little Italy, Polish Hill, Athens, Little Syria, Jewish "Ghetto," and the Black Belt.

The city's first black district was once a center of arts and culture, with a strong sense of community. During the 20th century, the older

Image Credits: Nicholas Byers as Cory (left) and Dereks Thomas (right) as Jim Bono in 2024's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Marisa Lenardson.

A street view of the Hill in the 1930s. Image credit: https://savingplaces.org/stories/the-story-of-the-pittsburgh-neighborhood-that-inspired-fences.

ethnic and Jewish populations moved away, and the Hill District became known as the Harlem of Pittsburgh, a place where the best jazz could be heard. It was known by many names: Little Harlem, Little Haiti, and "the crossroads of the world." After the demolition of the lower Hill in the name of urban renewal in the 1950s, the District was then divided into five census tracts: Crawford Roberts, Bedford Dwellings, Middle Hill, Upper Hill, and Terrace Village.

Currently, there is a growing feeling that the neighborhood is on the cusp of resurgence, thanks to the relentless work of a web of community-focused residents, nonprofit organizations, churches, and foundations. The August Wilson house is slated to be the site of a multidisciplinary arts center, with an artist-in-residency program.

Over its very long history, the Hill District has ranged from vibrant to distressed. Existing almost as long as the city itself, this area has undergone many transformations that have made it the place it is today. While enduring the changes brought by migration, industrialization, urban renewal, and de-industrialization, the number and composition of the residents have changed, but the neighborhood itself has survived. Unlike some past efforts, though, the present renewal is no top-down overhaul — today, the community has a powerful seat at the table and is using it.

Unit 02
ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Image Credits: Christopher Windom, Director of 2024's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Marisa Lenardson.

INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR, CHRISTOPHER WINDOM

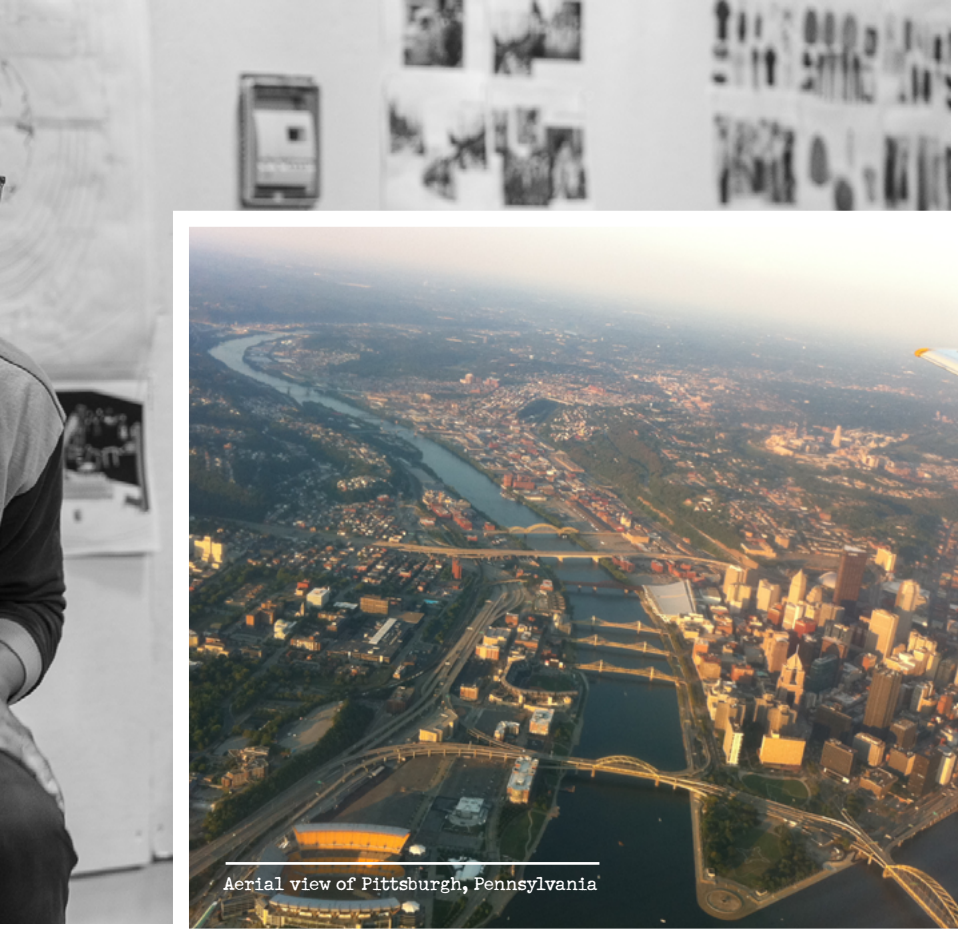
Am Wyckoff: What's your history with August Wilson's work?

Christopher Windom: This is my first August Wilson play to be working on as a creative. I've seen his works and read his works, and most recently read his biography, "August Wilson: A Life," which is really, really good, I highly recommend that to the teachers. It does a great job talking about his life and the chronology of the plays that he wrote, and you learn a lot about each play and the significance and importance of them. For myself, this is my first August Wilson to be working on, and it's an honor and a real privilege to be looking at the world through his eyes and his heart and his life experience.

AW: What is a major theme in this production that you are excited to explore or that you feel it is important to explore?

CW: The theme of family — the preciousness, the treasure that family can be, what community a family can offer to each individual, and the responsibility in return in supporting and participating in family life; that you give as much as you get, and you get as much as you give. And it's all looked at through the lens of love. I think a lot of the actions we see in this play are born from love but, also it overreaches. The theme of dreams comes up, people's dreams – what they strive for, how they envision their life going, and then the reality of what life really is. The theme of death and dying is a major theme, which ties into the preciousness of family and the time we have together, and the theme of responsibility. What is the responsibility in life, what is our responsibility to our family, those we love, those that are around us, and in what ways are we living up to those responsibilities? In the lookback, we all have families, and in different phases and stages of our lives we are able to understand how we are being loved, and then sometimes it's in the lookback that you're able to go, oh yeah, they did the best they could being parents, or even siblings. They did the best they could with what they had and how they understood the world.

AW: What has been one of the greatest challenges of working on this production? And what are you most excited about working on this production?



Aerial view of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

CW: One of the greatest challenges is the responsibility of ushering this significant and great work and this story, ushering it to being in this theater and this community, and to do it in a way that is honoring the writer, honoring the material, honoring the story, while also being interested in an artistic achievement, an artistic merit. The word singular – how to take this well-known piece and make it singular to this environment, to today, to this theater community. I guess how not to do a copy of something you've seen before, that looks and seems like something devoid of a heart or personality. One of the greatest challenges is how to serve two audiences, one for an audience who has seen the play and is familiar with it, and one for an audience who has never seen the play. And how to serve the audience who's seen it so that they can see it and it feel fresh, and how to serve the audience so they can see it clearly.

The thing I'm looking forward to is, honestly, moment-to-moment. I'm enjoying the company of actors that we have, I'm enjoying the design team and their effort, I'm enjoying our stage management team and our crew, just the day-to-day work that's going into putting this production on its feet, and the thing I'm looking forward to is really sharing it with the audience. It's really a labor of love I feel like I'm committing here, and everyone else is feeling a bit of devotion, a labor of love. I'm looking forward to sharing it with the audience.

AW: What do you hope students take away from this production?

CW: I would hope that they could be inspired by the story itself and the characters in the story. Troy, who on the surface can feel overbearing, larger-than-life, but when you look at his actions, he's actually doing so many right things for the sake of the family. He's making so many noble choices. And just how complex the makeup of his character can be. And the counterpart to Troy being Rose, and being inspired by her humanity and fortitude and compassion and intelligence, and just seeing an example of both sides of that spectrum. I would hope that they can be inspired by the story itself and I would hope that they would also be inspired by the experience of being in a theater and the theatricality of it all. It's the story but it's also the art form. I hope that they can be inspired by the artform as well.

For this particular production: In traditional form, [*Fences*] was a play written in the 1980s but set in the 1950s, and it feels like a play that could have existed in the 1950s if a writer like August Wilson was given the opportunity to tell this story with such depth and so many layers, and such a kaleidoscopic vision of a family. And in this case, a Black family. Don't ignore Rose – what you will see in the design is a gesture of the setting, meaning a gesture of the porch, a poetic gesture. Each object hangs above the head of the audience. It's a spare production, but also offers up opportunities for an audience to use their imagination, and what better way to feel included in a theater event.

Image Credits: Kelvin Roston Jr. (left) as Troy Maxson and Jackie Davis (right) as Rose in 2024's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Marisa Lenardson.

WILSON'S INTRODUCTION TO *FENCES*

"When the sins of our fathers visit us
We do not have to play host.
We can banish them with forgiveness
As God, in his Largeness and Laws."
– August Wilson

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS?

What different hurdles do white immigrants and Black people face in achieving the American dream?

After reading or seeing the play, or reading the synopsis and the character list, how does this introduction relate to each of the characters in *Fences*?

How does it frame the story?

Does it give you any insight into each character's motivations and emotions?

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 moneylenders. 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 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."

CHARACTERS

TROY MAXSON
Played by KELVIN ROSTON JR.

Troy Maxson is a 53-year-old man who works as a garbage collector. He has a wife, Rose, and several children including Lyons from a previous relationship, Cory, and Raynell, who he had with a lover while married to Rose. Troy previously was a successful baseball player in the Negro Leagues, but aged out of the sport before it became integrated. He now works as a garbage collector.

CORY
Played by NICHOLAS BYERS

Cory is Troy and Rose's teenage son. He has recently been recruited to play college football, but because of Troy's experience with baseball, Troy refuses to sign the papers allowing him to play. Cory eventually enlists in the army. He expresses throughout the play that he is living with Troy's shadow, and that he wants to leave and be free of his expectations and his example.

JIM BONO
Played by DEREKS THOMAS

Jim Bono is Troy's friend and coworker who comes by to drink on Friday nights. He and Troy have been friends for 30 years, and Wilson describes him as seeking to emulate Troy.

LYONS
Played by RODNEY WITHERSPOON II

Lyons is 34 years old, and Troy's son from a previous marriage. Wilson writes, "Though he fancies himself a musician, he is more caught up in the rituals and 'idea' of being a musician than in the actual practice of the music." He often borrows money from Troy, and is living with his girlfriend, Bonnie.

RAYNELL
Played by FELESE KPARYEA and BLAIR PIERRE

Raynell is Troy's daughter with his mistress, who dies while giving birth. Rose agrees to raise Raynell because she is innocent. Raynell is seven years old in the last scene of the play and meets Cory in the final scene.

ROSE MAXSON
Played by JACKIE DAVIS

Rose Maxson is 43 years old, a strong woman and mother. She is Troy's wife, and Cory's mom, and raises Raynell when Troy's mistress dies in childbirth. Throughout the play, she argues with Troy over his lack of support for Cory, his treatment of his brother, and his infidelity, and expresses herself honestly and strongly.

GABRIEL
Played by MARTINEZ NAPOLEON

Gabriel is Troy's brother, who was injured in World War II, leaving him disabled. He plays a trumpet and believes that he is the Archangel Gabriel and sells fruits and vegetables. After the war, Troy took Gabriel's payout for his injury. Gabriel begins the play living on his own, but is institutionalized over the course of the play.

Image Credits: Gustave Johnson as Cory 1992's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Mark Morelli.

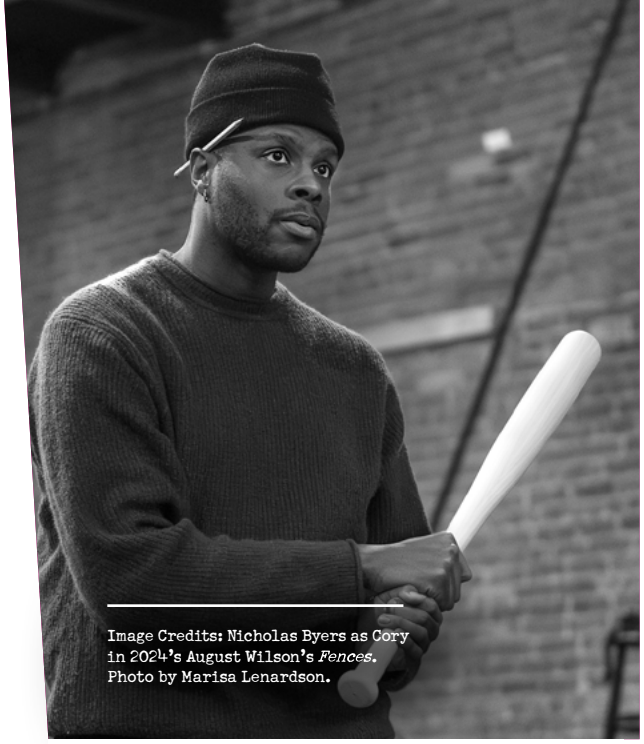


Image Credits: Nicholas Byers as Cory in 2024's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Marisa Lenardson.

PLOT SYNOPSIS

The show opens with Troy Maxson and his friend, Jim Bono, drinking beer in the backyard on a Friday evening. We learn that they are both garbage collectors. Troy has asked their boss why Black employees are only allowed to lift the garbage, not drive the trucks. Bono brings up a woman he thinks Troy is flirting with. Troy claims he doesn't "chase after women" since marrying Rose, but admits he flirted with the woman and bought her a drink. Rose enters, and Troy tells the story of how they met. Rose reveals that Cory was recruited by a college football team, and Troy expresses that he told Cory that "the white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football." Troy reflects on his past in baseball, and Bono says, "You just come along too early." Troy begins to talk about death and tells a story about wrestling Death for three days and three nights. He describes Death as wearing a white robe with a

hood on it and holding a sickle. Lyons arrives, Troy's son from a previous marriage, and a musician. Troy tells him about seeing the devil, who appears as a white man with a clipboard who sells him furniture, as long as he pays ten dollars a month, which he still does to this day. Lyons asks Troy for money, and Troy says that Lyons needs to "learn to take care of yourself." Troy gives Rose money to give Lyons 10 dollars.

Scene Two opens with Rose hanging up laundry and singing. Troy enters, and he and Rose argue about Rose playing the lottery. Gabriel enters and starts singing. He's Troys younger brother and was injured in World War II. He carries a trumpet, believes that he is the Archangel Gabriel, and sells fruits and vegetables. Gabriel explains that he moved over to Pearl's "to keep out from in [Troy's] way." Gabe says St. Peter has both Troy and Rose's names in his book. Gabriel leaves, and Rose says he isn't eating right, and that if he went back to the hospital he would be eating right. Troy says, "Don't nobody wanna be locked up, Rose." Troy reveals that Gabriel received 3,000 dollars after his injury, and "that's the only way [Troy's] got a roof over [his] head." Rose tells him not to feel guilty, because Gabriel couldn't manage that money. Troy says he doesn't blame himself, he is "just stating facts. If my brother didn't have that metal plate in his head... I wouldn't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of. And I'm fifty-three years old. Now see if you can understand that!" He goes to listen to the game at Taylors'.

Scene Three opens with Rose taking down her laundry. Rose tells Troy to fix the fence, and Troy and Cory begin to work on it. They start talking about Cory's recruitment to the football team and Troy says Cory should learn a trade or focus on school so, "that way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage." Cory explains that his boss has hired someone else while Cory plays football, which Troy doesn't agree with, and tells Cory to try to do both or quit the football team so he can keep the job. Cory says, "How come you ain't never liked me?" Troy explains that he provides for Cory not because he likes him but because it's his job and his responsibility, because Cory is his son. Rose has been listening, and enters, trying to convince Troy to let Cory play football. Troy says, "I don't want him to be like me! I want him to move as far away from my life as he can get." Rose rejects this, arguing that Troy was too old to play major league baseball, that Troy should support Cory, and that times have changed. Troy says, "I get up Monday morning... find my lunch on the table. I go out. Make my way. Find my strength to carry me through to the next Friday. That's all I got, Rose. That's all I got to give. I can't give nothing else."

In the next scene, Cory goes to his football game, and Bono and Troy enter. Troy reveals to Rose that he's been promoted to a driver, and that he's the first Black person to do so. Lyons enters. Bono reveals that Troy doesn't have a driver's license, which his boss doesn't know. Lyons pays Troy back, and Troy doesn't want to take the money. He pays Rose the money. Rose tells Troy that she wants him to sign the papers for Cory to be recruited. We hear more about Bono's backstory and his parents' lives, and Troy and Bono discuss their fathers. Troy expresses that he feels like his father fed him by giving him whatever was left over after his father ate. But he says, "No, he was trapped and I think he knew it. But I'll say this for him... he felt a responsibility towards us." Troy tells a story about his father assaulting his girlfriend when he was 14 and trying to hit his father but being knocked out by him. Troy left home at 14 and claims he walked 200 miles to Mobile to find work. In the early days, when he had Lyons, he was a robber, and was sentenced to 15 years in prison after stabbing someone. He met Bono in prison and learned to play baseball. Troy and Bono say they love each other. Cory enters and reveals that Troy told the Coach he couldn't play football anymore, and the coach wouldn't let him play and told the recruiter not to come.

Act Two opens with Cory hitting the baseball attached to the tree with his bat. Bono, Troy, and Cory work on building the fence. Troy and Cory wonder why Rose wants a fence, and Bono says, "Some people build fences to keep people out... and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you." Bono tells Troy he doesn't want him to mess up his relationship with Rose. He insinuates that Troy is juggling two women. Troy tells Rose that he went and paid Gabriel's bail, as he was arrested for disturbing the peace. In reality, Gabriel

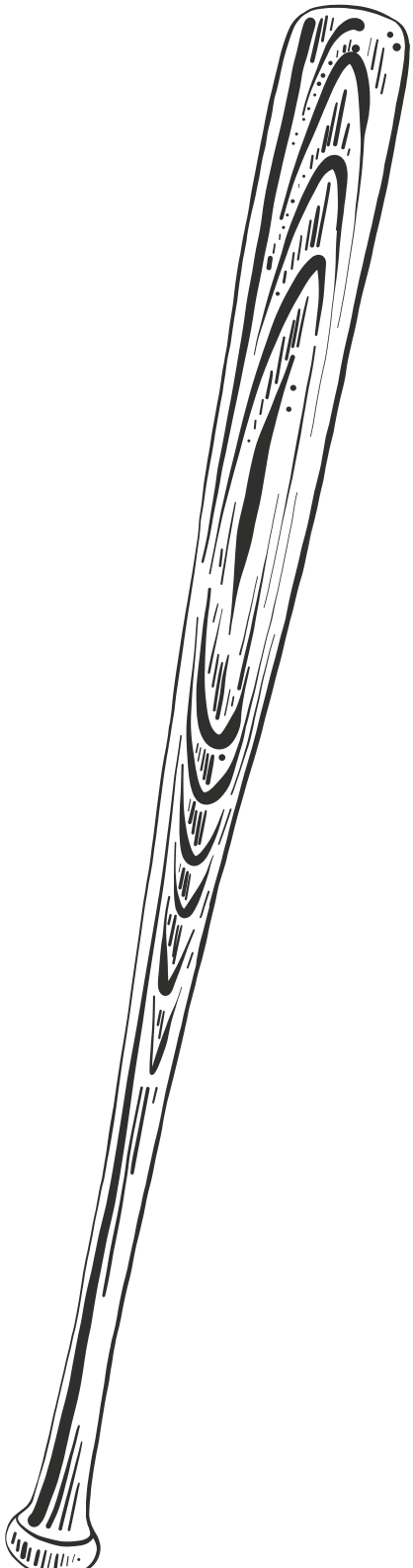
was being teased by kids and chased them away. Troy tells Rose that he's going to be a father to someone else's baby. Troy says he can't give up how this other woman makes him feel, and Rose delivers a powerful monologue. She says, "Don't you think I ever wanted other things? Don't you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me... You always talking about what you give... and what you don't have to give. But you take too. You take... and don't even know nobody's giving!" Troy grabs her arm forcefully, and Cory enters and grabs him. Rose stops Troy from hitting Cory back, and the scene ends.

Six months later, Rose comes into the yard and says she wants to talk to Troy. Troy reveals she hasn't talked to him since their fight. She asks if he's going to start coming straight home after work, and Troy says he just wants time to himself. Rose says that Troy told the police to lock up Gabriel, and he claims he didn't or didn't know what he was signing. Rose gets a call, and reveals to Troy that Alberta died having the baby. Troy gives a monologue to Death. He says, "Man to man. You stay on the other side of that fence until you ready for me. Then you come and knock on the front door. Anytime you want. I'll be ready for you."

Three days later, Troy comes home with his newborn daughter. Rose agrees to take care of the baby, "cause... like you say... she's innocent... and you can't visit the sins of the father upon the child[...] From right now... this child got a mother. But you a womanless man."

Two months later, Lyons drops off 20 dollars to pay Troy back. Cory has graduated from high school and tells Lyons he's trying to find a job. Bono comes by and says that he doesn't see Troy much anymore since Troy's promotion. Troy says he's thinking about retiring because his work feels lonely. Cory enters the yard and tries to get by Troy. Troy blocks his way, grabbing his leg and shoving him back. They argue, and Troy kicks Cory out of the house because "you a man." Troy advances towards Cory, and in defense he swings the baseball bat at Troy. Troy gets the bat and stops right before hitting Cory, who leaves. "Troy assumes a batting posture and taunts Death, the fastball in the outside corner."

It's now 1965, the morning of Troy's funeral. Rose, Bono, and Raynell, Troy's daughter, attend. Cory enters, dressed in a Marine's uniform and carrying a duffel bag. He introduces himself to Raynell, who doesn't remember him. Rose reveals that Gabe is still in the hospital. We learn that Cory is thinking about getting married. Lyons has since broken up with Bonnie, his girlfriend, and he has been at the workhouse serving a three-year sentence. Cory tells Rose that he isn't going to Troy's funeral. Rose tells him to put their issues aside, and Cory explains what it was like growing up with Troy "like a shadow." Rose delivers a monologue about growing up and making a life, and about her perspective on her life with Troy. They all sing about Blue, Troy's old dog, recalling a song Troy sings throughout the play. Gabriel enters from the alley, and he plays his trumpet to tell St. Peter to open the gates for Troy. No sound comes out of his trumpet, and as he plays, "a frightful realization" comes over him, "a trauma that a sane and normal mind would be unable to withstand." He begins to dance, yell, and sing, and the gates of heaven stand open.



NOTABLE THEMES

Storytelling

Scholar Ayako Kuwabara argues, "He finds fertile resources in the Black oral tradition. In fact, through characters in his plays, he tells the history of his own ancestors in a manner similar to African tribal storytelling. In *Fences*, Wilson traces three generations of an African American family, the Maxsons. The protagonist, Troy Maxson, tells long stories about the racial discrimination and exploitation he has suffered. He improvises stories freely and mixes facts and fictions. Wilson also uses songs, another important element of African American tradition, to be integrated in the play. It serves as a kind of metaphor for the black cultural identity."

During the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved people engaged in oral traditions brought over from Africa. Scholars particularly focus on the griot as an important figure. The word griot comes from West Africa and has French linguistic influence. A griot is a person in the African American oral tradition who is a master of storytelling: **"The griots' role** has traditionally been to preserve the genealogies, historical narratives, and oral traditions of their people; praise songs are also part of the griot's repertoire. Many griots play the kora, a long-necked harp lute with 21 strings. In addition to serving as the primary storytellers of their people, griots have also served as advisers and diplomats." This oral tradition became especially important to share and preserve history and cultural values, because enslaved people were not allowed to learn to read. Dr. Janice D. Hamlet writes, "It consisted of an impressive communication style that was rich in allusion, metaphor, and imagery and prolific in the use of body language and other nonverbal nuances. Also, the communication patterns of the enslaved stemmed from their creativity and will to survive – in most states in which slavery was legal, slaves were not allowed to learn to read. The oral tradition became not only a means of communication but also expressed personal presentation, verbal artistry and commentary on life's circumstances." The African-American oral tradition has its own genre customs and literary devices. **This article** discusses some common folktale themes, but remember that this genre is vast and plentiful, and there are many storytelling conventions at play.

What common themes come up in Troy's stories? What emotions do they inspire in you? What do his audience's reactions to his stories mean? What purpose does his storytelling serve to the play? To those around him?

Throughout *Fences,* Troy tells many stories that transgress the boundaries of time and reality. In these stories, he wrestles with Death, completes heroic feats, or tells of childhood traumas. It's possible that Troy and the play are interested in creating a mythology, as scholars have discussed (referenced throughout this section). Troy's name recalls the Trojan War, the war that sparked the two perhaps most recognizable names in Western epic literature – the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*. And Troy's stories take on an epic sense. Kester argues that Wilson develops a "poetics of memory," that temporal boundaries are transgressed in these stories. Does Troy's name seem significant to you?

Blumenthal argues that Troy's storytelling engages with Black oral

history traditions. She surveys scholars who have argued similarly about August Wilson's entire body of work: "As Pereira says, storytelling in the plays encapsulates 'the experience and cultural impulses of Black Americans' (12). Bogumil concurs, saying that Wilson uses storytelling to create a 'distinctive African-American drama' (10), and she agrees with Shannon (174) that the telling of stories 'becomes a means of self-authentication in which each character draws upon broader, African cultural identity for spiritual solace' (9)."

How do Troy's stories relate to his identity as a Black man? How does he interrogate racism in these stories?

Blumenthal argues that Troy's stories showcase the tension between Troy's personal sense of responsibility and the power of systemic racism to harm himself and his family. She writes, "Wilson uses Troy's stories to dramatize, through their contradictory meanings, the treacherous complications for Black men who attempt to live out such ideals in a racist society, he also shows us a Troy whose willingness to engage with these conflicts again and again must be seen as admirable, despite his failures... in doing so, Wilson demonstrates vividly not the perceptual distortions of one individual, but the terrifying obstacle which face all Black men of Troy's generation."

Do you see this in any of Troy's stories? Which ones?

Through Troy, Wilson develops a mythology within *Fences* specifically surrounding the figure of Death. Death is personified and animated, a figure that haunts the story. Gabriel also functions within this mythology – Gabriel not only believes he is an angel but becomes the angel in the final scene, opening the gates to heaven. Throughout the show, Troy tells stories of wrestling with Death, and speaks with Death at the ends of scenes. Gabriel also speaks about his relationship with St. Peter, claiming that he's ready to welcome Troy and Rose. The play also ends with Troy's funeral.

Death is personified by white figures in Troy's story: both as a white furniture salesman with a clipboard, who extracts a debt from Troy, and as a hooded figure, resembling a member of the Ku Klux Klan, as Blumenthal argues. Troy's wrestling with death therefore is also wrestling with white figures. Blumenthal argues that Troy is wrestling with systemic racism, and in his stories the figure representing racism often wins the fight.

What does Death represent to Troy? Does he mean Death literally? What is the significance of how Death is portrayed? What does Death mean to Gabriel? Why does the play end with Troy's funeral, and what is the significance of Gabriel's dance at the end?

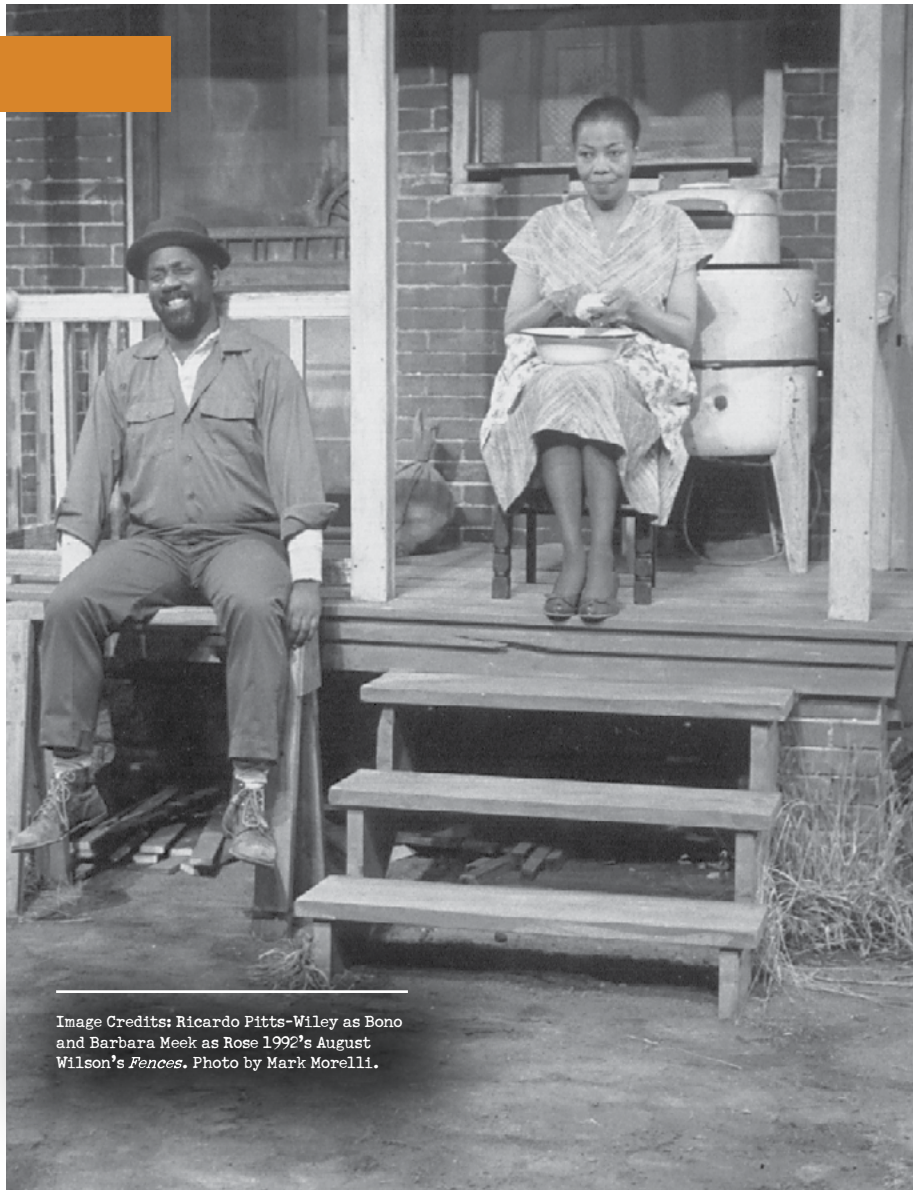


Image Credits: Ricardo Pitts-Wiley as Bono and Barbara Meek as Rose 1992's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Mark Morelli.

What are some stories many Americans believe? What kind of stories does our government tell? What stories did our founding fathers want us to believe?

History of the Negro Leagues and Segregation in Baseball

What kind of stories are told to you in school? Note: The section below uses the word "Negro," as it is the historical name for the baseball leagues referenced in Fences *and is necessary for historical context and accuracy. This word should not be used by non-Black folks.*

Black people were playing baseball before Jackie Robinson "broke the color line." As far back as in 1872, Bud Fowler, a Black man, became the first Black man to play in organized baseball, before Black people were forced out of Major League Baseball for the next 60 years by the 'gentleman's agreement.' The gentleman's agreement essentially meant that although there was no technical law keeping Black players from the major leagues, no Black player would ever be let in. John Holway's oral history, *Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues* exposes how some of the country's best baseball players ended their careers living in poverty because they were Black and shut out of the major leagues. This might remind you of Troy, who needed Gabriel's settlement to purchase a house after a legendary career in the Negro Leagues.

The Negro Leagues were created by Black players when white ball clubs would not allow them to play. They played in unofficial locations like fields, parks, and high schools; sometimes, they would pay to play on Major League fields, but were kept out of the locker rooms. Where a Negro League player might make $125 a month in 1934, a white Major League player would make $7000. Rube Foster 'officially' founded the Negro Leagues when he organized the league in 1920. Soon after, Ed Bolden founded an Eastern Colored League, which had a history of outplaying white teams. After the Eastern Colored League won against a white team, it was "the last time a big-league club could play the Blacks while wearing its own uniform... big leaguers would have to call themselves 'all-stars' if they wanted to barnstorm.'" And Black teams still beat those all-star white teams consistently.

Touring Negro League teams faced segregation and racism on the road. They often had to eat and sleep on the buses because restaurants, hotels, and grocery stores refused them service. They would face protests and even a Ku Klux Klan presence in some towns – on one instance, Oscar Charleston, a legendary player, pulled a Klansman's hood off, exposing the man underneath.

Baseball, known as the "great American pastime," serves as a helpful lens with which to view American racism. One article in the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch* wrote about the Negro Leagues: "There is some doubt 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." Bellamy interprets this quote, writing that the commentator frames admitting Black players' skill as surrendering the 'Americanness' of baseball. He is not considering Black people as Americans. Bellamy writes also about Josh Gibson, a legendary, virtuosic Black baseball player, whom Holway describes as a "broken, frustrated man, just too old to make the majors after so long a wait." Gibson also lived in Pittsburgh, and Bellamy argues Troy may be modeled off him. Bellamy writes, "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.'"

The gentleman's agreement stayed in place until commissioner A.B. "Happy" Chandler declared that a Black man could make it in baseball, and the Dodgers signed Jackie Robinson. Holway writes that after signing Robinson, "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." Jackie Robinson's signing meant baseball could be integrated, but it ushered in the end of the Negro Leagues. So, many of baseball's legendary greats ended their careers without recognition, equal pay, or equality writ large.

Susan Koprince writes,

> "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

Josh Gibson, legendary baseball player, who some believe Troy to be based on. Image credit: https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/gibson-joshua-josh-1911-1947"

(bleacher harmony); and more" (qtd. in Elias, "Fit" 3). Baseball's playing field itself has been viewed as archetypal- a walled garden, an American Eden marked by youth and timelessness. (There are no clocks in the game, and the runners move counter-clockwise around the bases.) As former Yale University president and former baseball commissioner Bart Giamatti once wrote, baseball is 'the last pure place where Americans can dream' (qtd. in Elias, "Fit" 9). In his Pulitzer Prize-winning drama *Fences* (1987), however, August Wilson uses both the history and mythology of baseball to challenge the authenticity of the American dream. Set in 1957, just before the start of the civil rights movement, *Fences* takes place at a time when organized baseball has finally become integrated, but when racial discrimination remains widespread. Indeed, the protagonist, Troy Maxon- a former Negro League slugger- is consumed with bitterness, convinced that if you are a Black man in America, 'you born with two strikes on you before you come to the plate' (69). Throughout the play Wilson places Troy within the historical context of the Negro Leagues, allowing his character to echo the feelings of actual Black ballplayers who were denied a chance to compete at the major-league level. Furthermore, by situating Troy within three of baseball's mythic settings- (1) the garden, (2) the battlefield, and (3) the graveyard or sacred space- Wilson contradicts the idea of America as a 'field of dreams,' using baseball instead as a metaphor for heroic defiance... In *Fences* Wilson uses Troy's experience in the Negro Leagues to demonstrate that the American dream remained out of reach for people of African descent."

Koprince also argues that Troy's relationship to baseball mirrors W.E.B. Du Bois' theory of double consciousness, "two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (Du Bois 45) because Troy is both an American and a Black man. She writes, "Driven to see himself (and to measure his success) through the lens of white America, Troy embodies both the psychological fragmentation of the Black American and the dualistic nature of Black baseball – a cultural institution that Early describes as an 'ironically compressed expression of shame and pride, of degradation and achievement.'" She describes Troy's time in the Negro Leagues as the closest he can come to experiencing the American Dream – but he is categorically excluded. Significantly, the ball that Troy could once hit out of the park is now tethered to a tree within his fenced-in backyard. Koprince argues that the backyard

becomes Troy's baseball field – at once his Eden, his battleground, and his final resting place. She argues convincingly that the baseball field also acts as these spaces in American mythology. Koprince writes,

> "Although Wilson's dramas are typically grounded in elements of African and African American cultures... *Fences* is unique in that it appropriates a traditionally white cultural form – baseball – in order to portray an African American experience in the twentieth century. By adopting this white cultural form, Wilson artfully expresses Troy Maxon's double consciousness – his complicated experience as a black man in a white-dominated world. At the same time, Wilson creates a 'subversive narrative' that competes with the American Dream itself (Shannon, *Fences* 20). Thus, he demonstrates that the national pastime has been stained by racism, that the Edenic promise of America is illusory, and that the traditional mythology of baseball must ultimately make room for a new and revolutionary mythos: that of the defiant African American warrior."

What are some associations you have with baseball? Can you think of other movies and TV shows or books that are about baseball? How did they portray the sport? Do you think baseball is the American past-time? Why? How do your thoughts on this change after learning the history of the Black baseball leagues? Does your opinion on Troy's character change?

Wilson uses storytelling to interrogate the mythologies that many Americans accept as true. *If baseball represents the American Dream, as many scholars argue, how does August Wilson interrogate the American Dream?* Troy interrogates the cultural conception that baseball is a pastime for all Americans, or some kind of great equalizer, by recounting his experience of racism and exclusion. *How does this then go on to challenge the American Dream?*

Fences

Bigsby argues about *Fences,* "In *Fences* the white world is a defining absence in so far as it sets the parameters of black freedom, determines the economic context, shapes the hopes and aspirations of those it casually relegates to the margins of experience."

What metaphorical fences surround Troy, Rose, and all the other characters? What fences exist in the play besides the one that Troy and Cory build?

The fence as an image has several valences in the American imaginary. Part of the American Dream is often described as including a "white picket fence." That fence is part of the suburban ideal – that all Americans should strive towards a house with a yard and a white picket fence. *But who does this fence keep out? Who does the American Dream let through the fence? What boundaries define the American Dream?*

Fences both keep people out and hem them in, as Bono says: "Some people build fences to keep people out... and other people build fences to keep people in. Rose wants to hold on to you all. She loves you."

Who is being confined by the fence in Fences? Do characters build fences between each other? Who is each character attempting to keep in and out?

Jackie Robinson, first Black baseball player to play in the Major Leagues. Image credit: https://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2022/04/07/jackie-robinson-mlb-color-barrier

Bigsby argues that "The fence, meanwhile, comes to stand for his wife's attempt to keep Troy in, to bind him to her; it also stands for Troy's attempt to hold knowledge at bay, knowledge of his own betrayals, his own failures and his own mortality." However, the fence could also be understood as protecting the family from the outside world. Some sources have argued that the fences represent the parameters of the baseball field that Troy has strived to hit beyond.

Do the characters in Fences *transgress fences throughout the play? It is interesting that Troy and Cory argue about if Troy can be recruited to football while building a fence. Does Troy try to keep people inside the fence too?*

Responsibility

August Wilson emphasizes Troy's responsibility as an important theme in the play: "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."

Later in the play, Troy cheats on Rose, and she reveals he doesn't come home after work and isn't present with her, and Cory talks about feeling the presence of Troy's shadow, and how he feels he couldn't be independent. Troy sees himself as responsible, but he paints it in different ways. To Cory, he talks about how he has no responsibility to like Cory, but he provides for him and prepares him for life. To Rose, he talks about how he always sleeps at their house at the end of the night. Blumenthal writes,

"Troy, who protects Rose from his anger by his stories and who struggles repeatedly to teach what he can only just barely believe in himself, does fail to be loyal to Rose, and he fails also to be generous to Cory. But the evidence of the stories suggests that Troy fails out of his ongoing and energetic struggle with cynical convictions about duty, not out of complacence, or stagnant attitudes... Wilson uses Troy's stories to make clear Troy's abiding preoccupation with the role of family man and with the responsibilities implicit in that role; the theme of duty is one which we see him return to again and again, compulsively, as much for himself, it would seem, as for his auditors... Wilson uses Troy's stories to dramatize, through their contradictory meanings, the treacherous complications for Black men who attempt to live out such ideals in a racist society, he also shows us a Troy whose willingness to engage with these conflicts again and again must be seen as admirable, despite his failures... In doing so, Wilson demonstrates vividly not the perceptual distortions of one individual, but the terrifying obstacle which face all Black men of Troy's generation. He dramatizes also the almost superhuman courage and determination to survive which is needed for even the limited success achieved by men like Troy, and in doing so, the playwright commands our respect for Troy whom he describes as a 'large' man, a man of 'strength,' and 'honesty.'" (94-5)

Do you think Troy is responsible to his family? How does he understand his own responsibility? How would you define responsibility (there can be different kinds of responsibility and different definitions)? What do you think Cory thinks about a father's responsibility? What about Rose?

August Wilson's Language

August Wilson began his career as a poet after **encountering the work of Langston Hughes**. He focused on poetry until moving to Minnesota in 1978, and shortly after published his first play, *Jitney,* in 1979. In 1987, he said, "For me, my background is poetry, and that's the foundation on which I approach my plays: the sound of the word, the idea of taking concepts and pressing them into 14 or 22 lines and making a whole, complete statement about something." August Wilson writes plays with the craft of poetry in mind, referencing sound, and uses copious metaphor, imagery, and rhythm. Lillias White, who played Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* at the Music Center Annex in LA, **says of the language:** "I found his language is very musical, but particularly in this play... if you stick to what he's written and stay in the moment, you feel the rhythm and you hear the music in it." Keith David, who played Slow Drag in the same production is quoted in the article saying, "'There is a rhythm in this language that if you betray, you won't find the truth of... It's inherent in the language.' In that way, the actor considers Wilson "the Shakespeare of our time.'"

As to the music these actors are noticing, August Wilson spoke often about the influence the Blues had on his work. Watch **this video** to hear August Wilson himself speak about his

work's relationship to the blues. He says, "I chose the Blues as my aesthetic," Wilson says. "I create worlds out of the ideas and the attitudes and the material in the blues. I think the blues are the best literature that Blacks have. It is an expression of our people and our response to the world. I don't write about the blues; I'm not influenced by the Blues. I am the Blues."

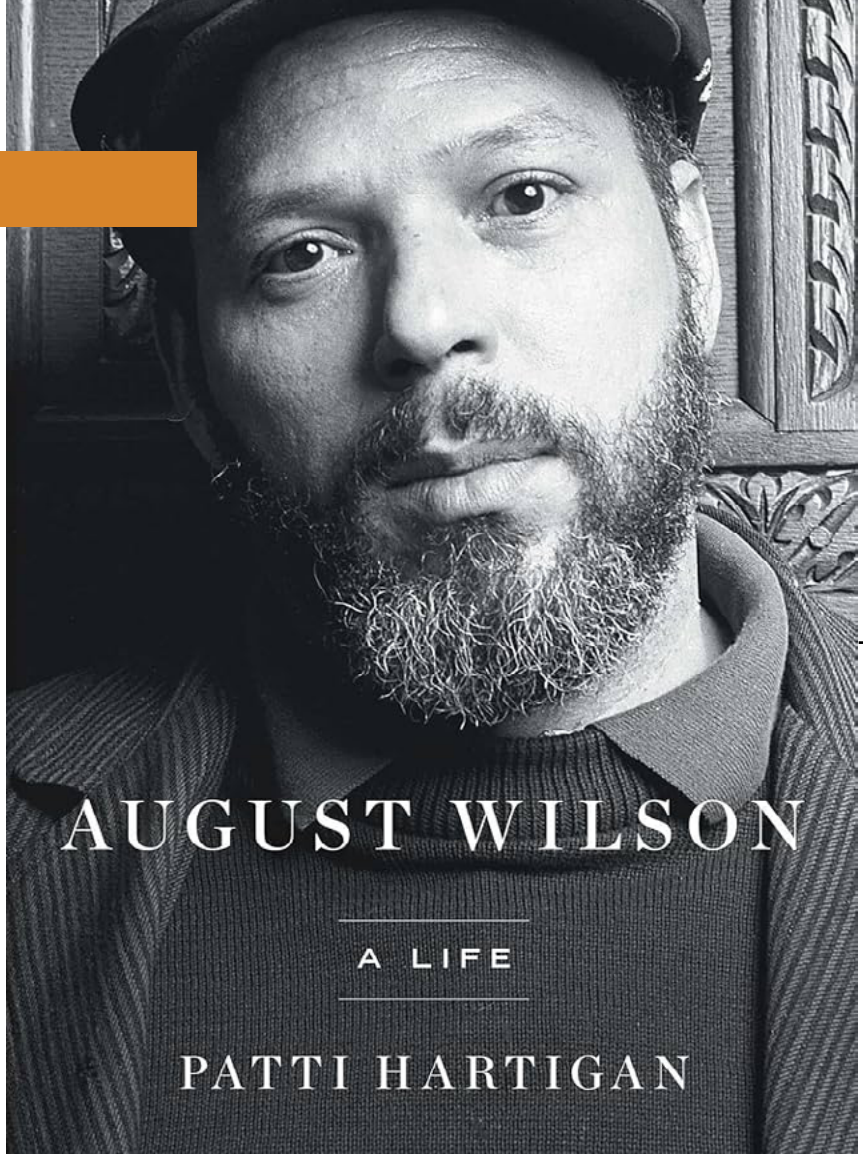
NPR reports, "'I put that on, and it was unlike anything I'd ever heard before," Wilson recalls. "Somehow, all that other music was different from that. And I go, 'Wait a minute. This is mine... there's a history here.' The first song on the record was 'Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine.' Listening to the song, over and over, Wilson realized he could write in the language he heard around him — Black street vernacular — rather than the English he admired in the works of such writers as Dylan Thomas. It was, he recalls, a defining moment: 'The universe stuttered, and everything fell into place.'"

At the end of this study guide, we've attached monologues and scenes. Read these sections of *Fences* out loud and see if you can identify the rhythm. *How does punctuation change how you read the lines? What do you imagine as you hear the words? What sounds do you hear most – any alliteration, hard consonants, open vowels? Do you naturally speed up or slow down at any point?* Discuss the language as if it were a poem, analyze the images and metaphors. [***Note: August Wilson writes specifically for and about Black people and the Black experience, and his characters often use African American Vernacular English. Only students who identify with that experience should perform these monologues.***]

August Wilson has also been lauded for beautifully representing the way Black people in the eras he writes about. Wilson uses African American Vernacular English, historically called Ebonics. This video is a great place to start on understanding the history, grammatical structure, and contemporary reactions and uses of AAVE: **https://youtu.be/dnOLKqhx_Co?feature=shared** and a corresponding article here: **https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine/african-american-vernacular-english**. The article discusses how AAVE grammar and vocab has been conventionalized, meaning it's understood by its broader speech community, even as there are diverse accents and vocabulary across regions (like all languages). It also mentions this Toni Morrison quote: "It's terrible to think that a child with five different present-tenses comes to school to be faced with books that are less than his own language. And then to be told things about his language, which is him, that are sometimes permanently damaging."

To wrap up our section on language, here's a quote from the director of Trinity Rep's production, Christopher Windom:

"*Fences* was August Wilson's second play, and he wanted to prove that he could write a well-made play in the style of the usual suspects. He was interested in hearing how people of Black culture really speak – being able to capture that and put that into the theatrical format, that's huge. The way he uses language is sometimes compared to Shakespeare in how accurate it is, how specific it is, and because it's so specific it gains a kind of universality, it becomes universal. When people speak of his long speeches (which over the course of writing a play, they're often said to be much longer and then he edits them down) they compare his speeches to arias of operas. His relationship with music and the Blues specifically informs his work."



FURTHER READING LIST ON THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN THE 50S AND TODAY

Here are some books referenced by the scholarship about Fences *and the experience it represents, and books suggested as tools for learning about the context surrounding* Fences *and how these issues continue today.*

https://www.kennedy-center.org/education/resources-for-educators/classroom-resources/media-and-interactives/media/theater/august-wilson--fences — This article has many great clips of August Wilson and actors speaking about *Fences* and clips of a production of the play

August Wilson: A Life
by Patti Hartigan

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.

August Wilson and Black Aesthetics
edited by Dana A. Williams and Sandra G. Shannon

Gem of the Ocean: August Wilson in the Black Diaspora
edited by Olasope O. Oyelaran

The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness
by Michelle Alexander

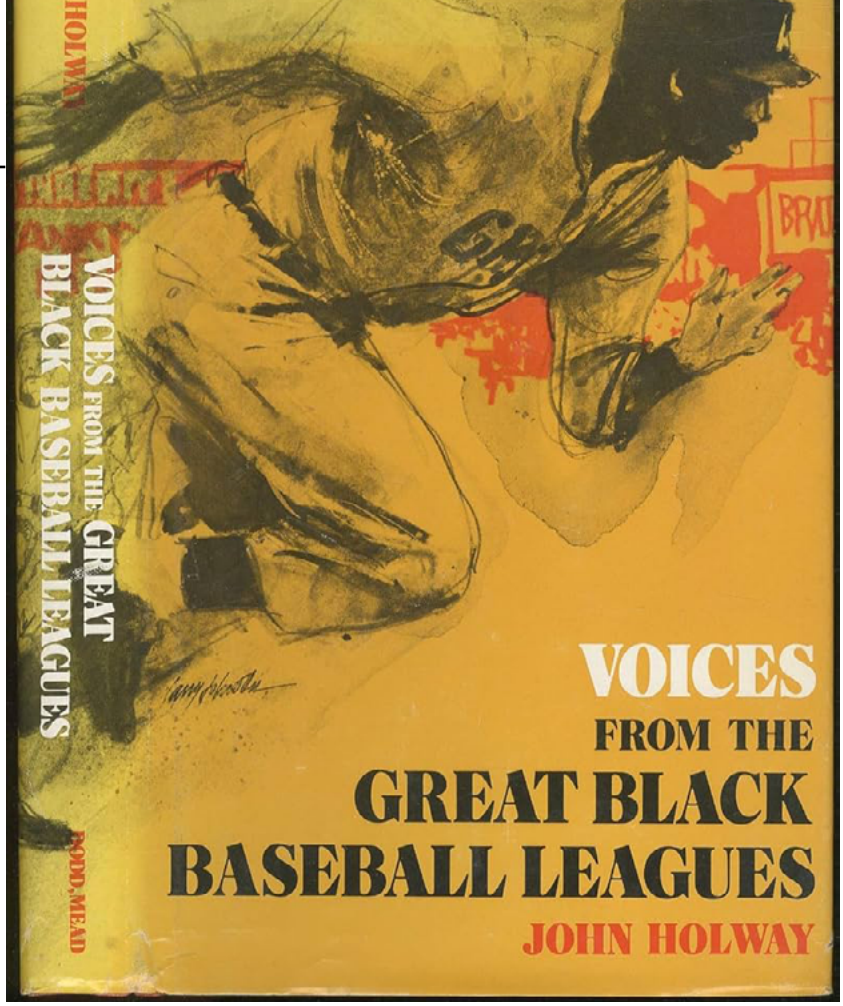
Voices from the Great Black Baseball Leagues
by John Holway

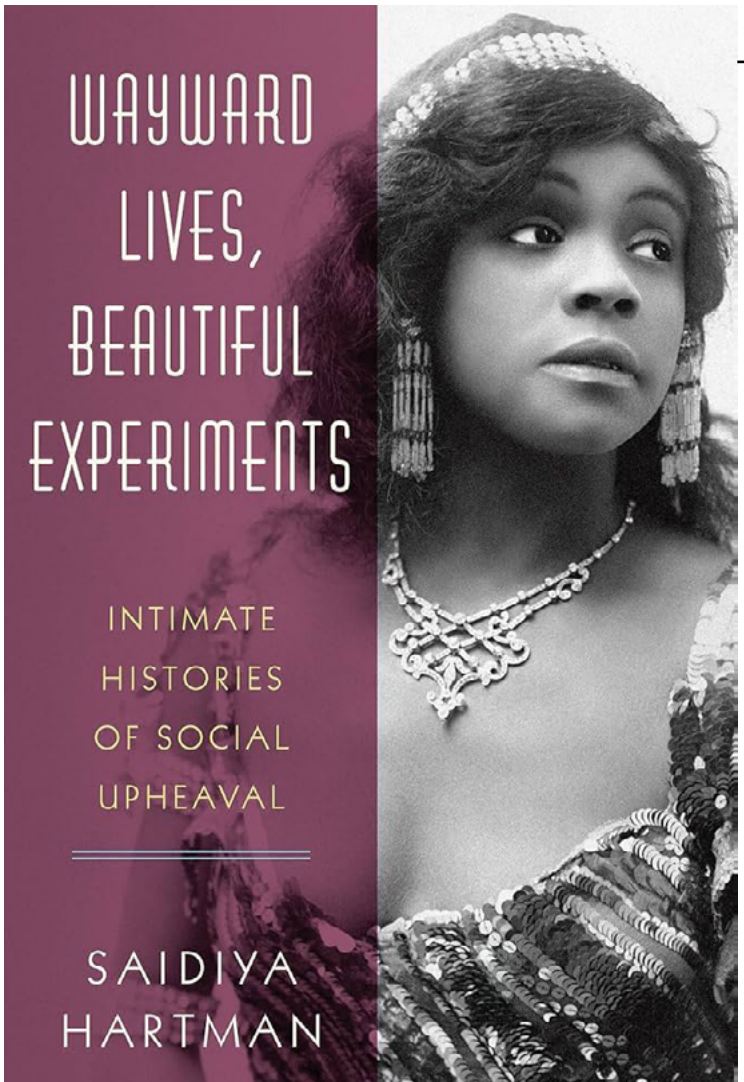
We Are the Ship: The Story of Negro League Baseball
by Kadir Nelson

Strivings of the Negro People
by W.E.B. Du Bois

Between the World and Me
by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Fight the Power: African Americans and the Long History of Police Brutality in New York City
by Clarence Taylor





Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval
by Saidiya Hartman

Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism
by bell hooks

Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches
by Audre Lorde

Women, Race & Class
by Angela Y. Davis

Princeton offers a great reading list on systemic racism, racial justice, and anti-racism here: *https://library.princeton.edu/news/general/2020-06-16/notable-books-systemic-racism-racial-justice-and-anti-racism-available-pul*

Image Credits: Rodney Witherspoon II (left) as Lyons and Jackie Davis (right) as Rose in 2024's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Marisa Lenardson.

Unit 03
ENTERING THE TEXT

EXERCISE 1: POEMS FROM SONGS

Divide into pairs or groups of three. Pick a song with lyrics that everyone in the group resonates with. Choose one verse of that song and the chorus to focus on and write the verse and chorus down on a piece of paper. Have one group member read the lyrics out loud as if they were a poem. What do you notice about the verse? Does it rhyme? Is there one image or metaphor that stands out to you? Does it tell a specific story? What about the chorus – many choruses have repetition and rhymes. Does yours? What effect does that have on you as a listener? You can discuss the questions as a group.

Now that you've turned the song into a poem, make it your own. Split groups up and work on your own for this part of the exercise. Keep the chorus the same and write a new verse. Count the number of syllables in each line of the song's lyrics and match them in each line of your new verse. For inspiration, you can expand on an image in the chorus or verse you chose. If you're feeling stuck, try changing one word in each line of the verse you picked. How does this change the song?

Stand up and read your poems aloud to the class. How is the experience different from hearing the song, as an audience member? Does the song mean something different to you now that you've done this exercise?

EXERCISE 2: LETTERS IN CHARACTER

The first part of the following activity gives students the opportunity to interact with the characters and plot points of the story. The second half of this activity allows students to get inside the character's head and understand the story from their perspective.

→ Have your students choose a character from the play and, using any of the following prompts, write a letter to that character: What advice would you give the character at this point in the story? What is something important that you want this character to know right now? Tell this character about an event in the story that hasn't happened yet.

→ Once everyone has finished, collect the letters and redistribute them to other students in the class.

→ Now, each student must imagine that they are the character that the letter is addressed to and respond to it from his or her perspective and their character's motivations for their actions in the play. Have your students write their responses in the form of a monologue and perform them for the class.

EXERCISE 3:
ALL CHUTES, NO LADDERS

How do the cards you are dealt at birth affect your ability to climb the social ladder? In *Fences*, all of the characters face many obstacles because of their race, gender, or disability. What does it feel like to need to work against these obstacles to achieve a similar goal to others?

Setup

Create a large game board in your classroom. You can do this by laying out paper, taping down a path, or using the floor of the classroom itself. When making this board, make sure to include 3 "ladders" and 3 "chutes." Alternatively, you can use the real game board from the board game Chutes and Ladders. Choose up to 3-5 students to participate in the game. Out of those students choose 2 of them and hand those students a number of "cards" that they can use to avoid falling down the chutes instead. Additionally, have these students start at a space ahead of start, determined by a number rolled on a 6-sided die. For an example of a life-sized Chutes and Ladders board, please click here for this example from Litercious.com.

Instructions

• Have each student take turns rolling a 6-sided die and moving that number of spaces forward. Do this until one person has made it to the end

• Once the game is done, have the students who played sit down, and take more volunteers. Once every student has played the game, divide them into smaller groups and have them discuss the following:

• Why did certain students get cards that let them skip or climb chutes?

• How did that make you feel seeing others get to do that?

• How did that make you feel seeing others not get to do that?

• How does this relate to the real world?

• What did the chutes and ladders represent?

• What did the cards represent?

• Do you have any examples of this in modern day?

• If the students have read or seen the show already, have them chat about the following:

• How did this relate to the show?

• What place did each character start and where did they end up?

Image Credits: Rodney Witherspoon II as Lyons in 2024's August Wilson's *Fences*. Photo by Marisa Lenardson.

EXERCISE 4: WHO TELLS YOUR STORY?

Have the class split into pairs and label one from each pair A and B. Have A interview B about the origin of your favorite gift or childhood toy, your most embarrassing memory or an embarrassing moment from a family member, or your first time trying your favorite food. You can only tell the story once, about one minute long. Then A will retell that story to the class, acting as an academic, a sales rep and a gossip columnist. Have B do the same for A performing as a spy, a flight attendant and a news reporter.

Discussion Questions: What aspects from the story do each of these people pull out? How does the story change depending on who is telling it? How does your understanding of the original storyteller change depending on who is retelling it? How does your perspective of the story change? Which version of the story are you most drawn to? Are there different themes that you gather from a performance versus reading the story in class? How does this affect our understanding of stories and how they are compiled or created?

EXERCISE 5: 101 WAYS TO READ A MONOLOGUE

Note: August Wilson writes specifically for and about Black people and the Black experience, and his characters often use African-American Vernacular English. Only students who identify with that experience should perform these monologues.

A monologue, or soliloquy, is a long speech made by one person. Sometimes it can be a challenge for a young actor to take on a piece of text and perform it on his or her own, so this activity is a way to get your students to forget their inhibitions and have fun with it.

• Pick one or more of the monologues below, and hand them out to your students. You can assign or let them choose which monologue they want to do and give them a few minutes to read it over a few times and familiarize themselves with it.

• In partners, let them read it out loud to one another a few times in whichever way they want to.

• After this, using your own suggestions and those of your students, throw out different ways to read the monologue. Feel free to be as wacky as you want — this is supposed to

be fun. You can filter the suggestions and pick one that you think would work and let them do it that way. Some examples of different ways to read it include (but are definitely not limited to): an aerobics instructor, an army general, someone who desperately has to go to the bathroom, a squirrel, the laziest person in the world, singing it, whispering it, telling it like it's a scary story, like an interpretive dancer, like they are in a musical, like a President, or a King ... you can even use celebrity names and have them imitate them using the monologue

• This can be done with all the students working in partners or on their own at the same time. If this is a particularly brave group, you can challenge them to take your suggestions and perform individually in front of the class

• After every willing student has performed, take some time to talk about what they got from it. Did it help them understand the monologue better? If so, how? Did they find that any of the interpretations, as silly as they may have been, worked and made some sense? Which ones, and why? How does this help them as actors?

MONOLOGUES

TROY

Look here, Bono . . . I went down to see Hertzberger about some furniture. Got three rooms for two-ninety-eight. That 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 here – Rose'll tell you – madder than hell. Sit down . . . try to figure 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 come 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 me 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, first of every 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 come and I send my ten dollars, Rose'll tell you. I ain't never seen him since. Now you tell me who else that could have been but the devil? I ain't sold my soul or nothing like that, you understand. Naw, I 5 wouldn't have truck with the devil about nothing like that. I got my furniture and pays my ten dollars the first of the month just like clockwork.

ROSE

I been standing with you! I been right here with you, Troy. I got a life too. I gave eighteen years of my life to stand in the same spot with you. Don't you think I ever wanted other things? Don't you think I had dreams and hopes? What about my life? What about me. Don't you think it ever crossed my mind to want to know other men? That I wanted to lay up somewhere and forget about my responsibilities? That I wanted someone to make me laugh so I could feel good? You not the only one who's got wants and needs. But I held on to you, Troy. 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. But I held on to you, Troy. I held you tighter. You was my husband. I owed you everything I had. Every part of me I could find to give you. And upstairs in that room . . . with the darkness falling in on me . . . I gave everything I had to try and erase the doubt that you wasn't the finest man in the world. And wherever you was going . . . I wanted to be there with you. 'Cause you was my husband. 'Cause that's the only way I was gonna survive as your wife. You always talking about what you give . . . and what you don't have to give. But you take too. You take . . . and don't even know nobody's giving!

CORY

Mama... listen... I can't drag Papa with me everywhere I go. I've got to say no to him. One time in my life I've got to say no. The whole time I was growing up... living in his 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 in your flesh. Trying to crawl in. Trying to live through you. Everywhere I looked, Troy Maxson was staring back at me... hiding under the bed... in the closet. I'm just saying I've got to find a way to get rid of that shadow, Mama. I don't want to be Troy Maxson. I want to be me.

SCENES

TROY AND CORY

Troy: Your mama tell me you done got recruited by a college football team? Is that right?

Cory: Yeah. Coach Zellman say the recruiter gonna be coming by to talk to you. Get you to sign the permission papers.

Troy: I thought you supposed to be working down there at the A&P. Ain't you suppose to be working down there after school?

Cory: Mr. Stawicki say he gonna hold my job for me until after the football season. Say starting next week I can work weekends.

Troy: I thought we had an understanding about this football stuff? You suppose to keep up with your chores and hold that job down at the A&P. Ain't been around here all day on a Saturday. Ain't none of your chores done... and now you telling me you done quit your job.

Cory: I'm gonna be working weekends.

Troy: You damn right you are! And ain't no need for nobody coming around here to talk to me about signing nothing.

Cory: Hey, Pop... you can't do that. He's coming all the way from North Carolina.

Troy: I don't care where he coming from. The white man ain't gonna let you get nowhere with that football noway. You go on and get your book-learning so you can work yourself up in that A&P or learn how to fix cars or build houses or something, get you a trade. That way you have something can't nobody take away from you. You go on and learn how to put your hands to some good use. Besides hauling people's garbage.

Cory: I get good grades, Pop. That's why the recruiter wants to talk with you. You got to keep up your grades to get recruited. This way I'll be going to college. I'll get a chance...

Troy: First you gonna get your butt down there to the A&P and get your job back.

Troy: You a bigger fool than I thought... to let somebody take away your job so you can play some football. Where you gonna get your money to take out your girlfriend and whatnot? What kind of foolishness is that to let somebody take away your job?

Cory: I'm still gonna be working weekends.

Troy: Naw... naw. You getting your butt out of here and finding you another job.

Cory: Come on, Pop! I got to practice. I can't work after school and play football too. The team needs me. That's what Coach Zellman say...

Troy: I don't care what nobody else say. I'm the boss... you understand? I'm the boss around here. I do the only saying what counts.

Cory: Come on, Pop!

Troy: I asked you... did you understand?

Cory: Yeah...

Troy: What?!

Cory: Yessir.

Troy: You go on down there to that A&P and see if you can get your job back. If you can't do both... then you quit the football team. You've got to take the crookeds with the straights.

Cory: Yessir.

TROY AND ROSE

Rose: Troy, I want to talk to you.

Troy: All of a sudden, after all this time, you want to talk to me, huh? You ain't wanted to talk to me for months. You ain't wanted tot alk to me last night. You ain't wanted no part of me then. What you wanna talk to me about now?

Rose: Tomorrow's Friday.

Troy: I know what day tomorrow is. You think I don't know tomorrow's Friday? My whole life I ain't done nothing but look to see Friday coming and you got to tell me it's Friday.

Rose: I want to know if you're coming home.

Troy: I always come home, Rose. You know that. There ain't never been a night I ain't come home.

Rose: That ain't what I mean... and you know it. I want to know if you're coming straight home after work.

Troy: I figure I'd cash my check... hang out at Taylors' with the boys... maybe play a game of checkers...

Rose: Troy, I can't live like this. I won't live like this. You livin' on borrowed time with me. I'ts been going on six months now and you ain't been coming home.

Troy: I be here every night. Every night of the year. That's 365 days.

Rose: I want you to come home tomorrow after work.

Troy: Rose... 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.

Rose: What about me? When's my time to enjoy life?

Troy: I don't know what to tell you, Rose. I'm doing the best I can.

Rose: You ain't been home from work but time enough to change your clothes and run out... and you wanna call that the best you can do?

TROY, ROSE, LYONS, AND BONO

Lyons: Hey, Pop.

Troy: What you come "Hey, Popping" me for?

Lyons: How you doing, Rose?
(He kisses her.)
Mr. Bono. How you doing?

Bono: Hey, Lyons... how you been?

Troy: He must have been doing alright. I ain't seen him around here last week.

Rose: Troy, leave your boy alone. He come by to see you and you wanna start all that nonsense.

Troy: I ain't bothering Lyons.
(Offers him the bottle.)
Here... get you a drink. We got an understanding. I know why he come by to see me and he know I know.

Lyons: Come on, Pop... I just stopped by to say hi... see how you was doing.

Troy: You ain't stopped by yesterday.

Rose: You gonna stay for supper, Lyons? I got some chicken cooking in the oven.

Lyons: No, Rose... thanks. I was just in the neighborhood and thought I'd stop by for a minute.

Troy: You was in the neighborhood, alright. You telling the truth there. You was in the neighborhood cause it's my payday.

Lyons: Well, hell, since you mentioned it... let me have ten dollars.

Troy: I'll be damned! I'll die and go to hell and play blackjack with the devil before I give you ten dollars.

Bono: That's what I wanna know about... that devil you done seen.

Lyons: What... Pop done seen the devil? You too much, Pops.

Troy: Yeah, I done seen him. Talked to him too!

Rose: You ain't seen no devil. I done told you that man ain't had nothing to do with the devil. Anything you can't understand, you want to call it the devil.

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