

Shakespeare & Co., Lenox, MA

Fences by August Wilson. Directed by Christopher V. Edwards .

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“I know you got some Uncle Remus in your blood.”

Troy Maxson is intent on building a fence around his property in order to mark it as his own and nobody else’s. He is a middle-aged man with two sons, a wife, a job and a need to be appreciated by family and friends alike. He is a storyteller whose stories are personal and always consistent, proof of their truth. What Troy doesn’t realize is the fact that he is also building fences around himself, invisible walls of truth-as-deception, fences meant to protect him from exposing the hidden facts of his life. In love with his wife, Rose, of eighteen years he also maintains a relationship with a young woman named Alberta who is pregnant with Troy’s third child. Truths have a way of jumping over fences and Troy’s emerges as it must, and it changes his world more than he expects it would; it brings with it a different sort of fence: one with swords poised.



Kenneth Ransom, Brian D. Coats, Ella Joyce, L. James, "ranney", Ashley McCauley Moore, and JāQuan Malik Jones; Photo: Nile Scott Studios

Troy is played by “ranney” who makes the role his own: blustering, loving, irascible and erotic. He exposes the man for all his meanness and his ability to love. Troy is cruel to his



“ranney”, JäQuan Malik Jones;
Photo: Nile Scott Studios

seventeen-year-old son Corey, smashing the boy’s dreams and replacing them with the hard facts of a black man’s life as Troy sees it. He badgers the boy into a loveless relationship when Corey only wants a father who will accept the next generation’s dreams, something beyond just fences. In the course of the play’s two years Troy destroys his friendship with Bono, he bestie, destroys the lifestyle of his brother Gabriel and alienates his entire family. “ranney’s” powerful performance makes it all very real and honest. We mourn him for the man he could have been.

As his son, Corey, JäQuan Malik Jones is simply wonderful. He plays a young man who wants to love his father but he is prevented from doing so by the man himself. An impetuous teenager, Corey moves in his own ways into a life he never dreamed of, leaving behind his all-important dreams of a College sports existence and leaving his father’s house as well. Jones is very good in this role, being attractive and impotent at the same time under Troy’s heavy hand.

Bono is played by Kenneth Ransom. Best friend roles are never easy and Ransom takes on the task of making Bono important when the man really isn’t. He feels important to the friendship he bears for Troy but Maxson is only peripherally interested in his buddy. That friendship becomes difficult to watch as the play progresses and that’s just as it should be.

Troy’s brother Gabriel, brain-damaged in World War II, is played with great style and verve by Brian D. Coats. Coats completes the play’s concept of fences with his final tribute to the brother who betrayed his trust. It moved me greatly.

Rose is played beautifully by Ella Joyce who gives her character class and romance. It is impossible not to fall in love with her, as Troy seems to, but her ire on discovering his romantic treachery is equally beautiful and her decision to



Ella Joyce and Brian D. Coats; Photo: Nile Scott Studios

raise his illegitimate child is both rewarding and chilling. She is a wonderful mother to Corey and also to her step-son Lyons, very well played by L. James. She is a patient surrogate mother to Raynell, Troy's last child, played sweetly by Ashley McCauley Moore. Though not the central character in the play Joyce's Rose moves into a permanent center stage spotlight for the bulk of the play, occupying our attention even when she's not on stage.

On an ideally beautiful set designed by Jon Savage that shows the pride Troy and Rose have in their common little house in Pittsburgh director Christopher V. Edwards had created the perfect set of connections among the characters in Wilson's play. He has given them the physical collaborations that expose the real feelings often unexpressed in words. We watch Troy's many interactions with family, friends, and others grow out of his actual intentions into those awkward isolated spots beyond the unseen fences in his life. It is very fine, remarkable work by a director.



JāQuan Malik Jones and Ella Joyce; Photo: Nile Scott Studios

The 1950s costumes designed by Nia Safarr Banks help define the characters. Aja M. Jackson's lighting moves from the natural to the mystical at just the right moments in the play. Caroline Eng's sound design helps define the times.

"Fences" is Wilson's true masterpiece and it is seen here in a very exciting and positive way. One of the season's most worthwhile productions of an American Classic, it is not to be

missed, not by any true theater lover.

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Fences plays in the Tina Packer Playhouse at Shakespeare & Company, 70 Kemble Street, Lenox, MA through August 27. For information and tickets call 413-637-3353 or go to www.shakespeare.org.