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Safe at home?: August Wilson’s Fences

‘Some people build fences to keep people out . . .
And other people build fences to keep people in.’
Jim Bono, Fences

August Wilson was one of America’s most gifted storytellers. His plays read like fiction, the narrative drive, symbolic settings, evocative stage directions, music, and characters themselves propelling the action with a sparkling performativity. This sense of storytelling is nowhere more evident than in Fences (1985). No wonder Lloyd Richards, who directed so many of Wilson’s plays throughout their careers, suggested one year before its Broadway premiere, on 26 March 1987, at the Street 46th Theatre, that the playwright was ‘one of the most compelling storytellers to begin writing for the theater in many years’. Following the success of his first Broadway play, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom (1984), Fences, which in 1987 won the Pulitzer Prize, the Tony Award and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award, confirmed the arrival of a theatrical voice of genuine originality.

Fences concerns the lives of the Maxsons, an African American family whose struggles are chronicled from 1957 to 1965. The dates, of course, encompass a key period in the civil rights movement, but this was also the time in which Wilson was a teenager and high school student, and experienced the full force of white racism. Ostensibly a fairly straightforward domestic drama, Fences, by the final blackout, has expanded into an enabling fable of rebellion and recovery, of myth and history, and of confrontation and expiation. Asked two years before his death if he considered Fences his ‘signature play’, Wilson commented that that accolade would go to Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1986). But, most theatregoers and critics feel, Fences remains one of his finest achievements.

Such achievement, what John Barth calls ‘passionate virtuosity,’ took Wilson years to perfect. In 1968 he helped to establish the Black Horizons Theatre Company in Pittsburgh, a liaison that gave him a chance to hear his
language live on a stage. He was not pleased. He subsequently admitted that at that time he did not respect the ways his fellow blacks talked and therefore tried to alter and, in a sense, falsify the linguistic sources that lay before him. In 1978 he moved to St Paul and began writing scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota, and it was during his stay in the Twin Cities that he became associated with the Penumbra Theatre in St Paul. His early plays, Black Bart and the Sacred Hills (1981), Fullerton Street (1981) and Jitney (1982), show Wilson struggling, with uneven results, to transmute craft into art. The limitations of these early plays, Jitney aside, lay in their language, in Wilson’s unwillingness to tap into the musicality and unique rhythms of his black linguistic heritage and culture. In effect, he denied himself access to the very subjects that would become the greatest resource for Fences and his subsequent works: history, or what Suzan-Lori Parks often refers to as the holes in American history, and the language deployed to bring that history and the African American experience to life in performance.

Their unimpressive debuts notwithstanding, these first plays were important to the development of Wilson’s career, and, more specifically, to the development of his stage language. For it was during their writing and production that he began to attend to the linguistic and theatrical possibilities implicit in black dialect. Rather than devaluing the black idiom he knew so well, as he had done in his first compositions, he now began to appreciate, indeed to celebrate ‘voices I had been brought up with all my life’. As he told one interviewer, ‘I realized I didn’t have to change it [black dialogue]. I began to respect it.’ Those ‘voices’ beautifully fill the stage in Fences.

This play extends Wilson’s exploration of the African American experience within the twentieth century. Troy Maxson, the protagonist, is a former baseball player, a talented athlete whose prowess on the field never received the attention or recognition it deserved because, in part, he was imprisoned during his prime playing years (though, ironically, this is when he learnt the game) and, of course, blacks were not then allowed to play in the Major Leagues. Thus Troy, now a 53-year-old garbage collector, has collected his share of dreams deferred and hopes deflected. Wilson animates the play with a host of characters whose intersecting lives contribute to its rich plot. Every scene of the play, Wilson has pointed out, features Troy, and audiences watch as Rose, Troy’s powerfully steady and loving wife of eighteen years, and Cory, their son, debate each other’s dreams and desires against the backdrop of a rundown inner-city neighbourhood.

It is, in part, a play about a father who emerged from a battered past and who once dreamed of swinging for the fences – playing professional baseball – only to be consigned to being a garbageman. It is equally a play about two sons’ thwarted dreams. Lyons, Troy’s son from a previous
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marriage, has struggled for years, with little success, to establish a musical career, while Cory, Troy and Rose’s younger son, finds his hopes of attending college on a football scholarship sabotaged by his father and himself consigned to join the Marines. Jim Bono emerges as Troy’s best friend, an accepting man who is a kind of raisonner in the play and who offers sound advice throughout. Troy’s brother, Gabriel, meanwhile, was severely wounded in the Second World War and until very recently lived in the Maxson home on a government pension.

As the play develops, we learn about these characters and their aspirations, their attenuated options, difficult pasts and immediate predicaments, including the fact that Troy has a newborn baby girl, Raynell, the product of his ongoing affair with Alberta, to raise. Wilson adds yet another layer of tension and loss to the plot when we learn that Alberta has died in childbirth. Fences, a play about family, love, friendship, betrayal and human desires, and what happens to individuals whose private needs jar with their outer world of limited possibilities, spans an eight-year period, culminating with Troy’s death and funeral scene. In its richly symbolic exploration of the home life of the Maxsons, it is now regarded as an important contribution to the ongoing narrative history of the American stage.

The title of this chapter, ‘Safe at home?’, is ironic, for ‘Safe at home’ is the baseball term that every player trying to score yearns to hear from the home-plate umpire. Within the language of American popular culture, it is a term instantly recognizable to nearly all Americans. Troy dreamed of playing in the Major Leagues and hearing the umpire bellow ‘Safe at home,’ as he scored but, of course, never had the opportunity to enjoy such an experience. Further, in the world Wilson constructs for his protagonist, Troy is hardly ‘safe’ and secure and fulfilled at home. The home he inhabits harbours a paradoxical mixture of refuge and tension, shelter and rejection, love and indifference. It is a home that may not appear as depressing as Lincoln and Booth’s squalid apartment in Parks’s Top Dog/Underdog (2001), but it is a place from which a son is physically and emotionally evicted and where a husband has damaged his marriage immeasurably through his trespasses.

Wilson initially spotlights the idea of Troy’s deferrals and deflections visually with the physical set of the play. When theatregoers settle into their seats, they see a stage that at first glance seems fairly unremarkable. As a framing device, though, James D. Sandefur’s set, in the original production, provided a richly symbolic point of entry into Wilson’s play. The drama unfolds within the fenced yard surrounding the home of Troy and Rose Maxson, an ‘ancient two-story brick house set back off a small alley in a big-city neighborhood’ (n.p.). Their small yard lacks grass, the wooden porch is ‘badly in need of paint’, and fence-building equipment and a pile of lumber are plainly visible,
as is a baseball bat propped against a tree. From one tree hangs a baseball made of rags. Stage right are two oil drums that the Maxsons use for garbage cans. Wilson works carefully to ensure a semiotic of play space that reveals much about the challenging life of its occupants. It is not for nothing that Wilson specifies that the newly constructed wooden porch, though solid, ‘lacks congruence’.

Wilson foregrounds the action with copious stage notes preceding the play. These are of crucial importance. They become, textually and symbolically, part of the performance, part of what Michael Issacaroff and Robin F. Jones call a ‘performing text’. His stage notes chronicle the successful immigration of Europeans whose ‘capacity for hard work’ ultimately certified their financial and cultural security in America. By contrast, ‘the descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation’. Their lives are filled with ‘quiet desperation and vengeful pride’, a description that certainly fits Troy’s life. Interestingly, Wilson ascribes to Troy many of the terms employed to characterize the Europeans, for he is a large man whose ‘honesty, capacity for hard work, and . . . strength’ inspire his friends and family and, despite his considerable faults, define his not always dignified dignity.

Troy has challenged his employer about the unfair working conditions under which he and other blacks labour. A lifetime of missed opportunities plague him and at his age he demands a reckoning; on one level he wins, however minor and ironic such a victory may seem. He is granted his wish not to do the heavy lifting of the garbage but instead to drive the garbage truck. This is a Troy who in 1941 struggled with pneumonia, an illness that nearly killed him, and who survived fifteen years of prison life. He emerges as a survivor, a warrior whom Bono, his dear friend, and Rose, his wife, admire and love.

Indeed, Wilson has said that he is fond of presenting in his plays a man who has ‘a warrior spirit’. This ‘warrior’ figure is a strong, ambitious man who, frustrated with outer injustices, seeks, if possible, to precipitate social change. Levee, in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Boy Willie in *The Piano Lesson* (1987), and Sterling in *Two Trains Running* (1990) approximate this warrior image, as, to a degree, does Troy, who, like Levee before him, also embodies the problems of someone challenging the dominant culture. But both men are also figures whose flaws stem from an inability to harness frustration with reality, and reality with constructive private and public change. Like Walker Vessels in Amiri Baraka’s *The Slave* (1964), or Sergeant Waters in Charles Fuller’s *A Soldier’s Play* (1982), Troy Maxson seems fated to destroy, or at least tear down, the many metaphoric fences within his life. Frustrated by being barred (in many senses of that term) from the Major Leagues, haunted by generations of racial disenfranchisement, rejected by a brutalizing father,
Troy, in 1957, has come to fence out those spiritually and culturally closest to himself.

Troy Maxson emerges as a man savagely divided against himself. He is a figure who is clearly at odds with those who come within his orbit, but he is also a man who is equally at odds with his own very being in the world. He fences himself in. Although Wilson has resisted comparisons between *Fences* and Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman* (1949), there is a similarity between the houses of the Lomans and Maxsons; a similarity both in architectural and symbolic terms; a similarity in the fathers’ respective infidelities, and, more compellingly, in the father-son tensions. Indeed, the tension between Troy and his teenage son Cory underscores just how entrapped these characters are. Cory yearns to play football; his father wants him to mend fences, and to secure a vocational job rather than attending college, like Biff Loman, on a football scholarship. Cory exudes youthful enthusiasm; Troy, perhaps sensing something of himself within his son, and perhaps subconsciously wanting to deny his son the sporting and educational opportunities he had been denied himself, resents the boy’s youthfulness. Cory feels that the racial injustices suffered by his father do not fully apply to him. Troy has suffered profoundly from the white world that has fenced him in athletically, professionally and emotionally. Cory sees no reason why this should define his own possibilities. If Biff Loman saw his father as a fake, Cory sees Troy as a paternal oppressor.

Wilson himself believed that the father-son conflict within American culture was ‘actually a normal generational conflict that happens all the time’. He told David Savran that such conflicts are healthy and positive, and that Troy’s attitude and actions towards his son throughout the play are motivated by love. As he explained:

Troy is seeing this boy walk around, smelling his piss. Two men cannot live in the same household. Troy would have been tremendously disappointed if Cory had not challenged him. Troy knows that this boy has to go out and do battle with that world: ‘So I had best prepare him because I know that’s a harsh, cruel place out there. But that’s going to be easy compared to what he’s getting here. Ain’t nobody gonna whip your ass like I am going to whip it.’ He has a tremendous love for the kid. But he’s not going to say, ‘I love you,’ he is going to demonstrate it. He’s carrying garbage for seventeen years just for the kid. The only world Troy knows is the one that he made. Cory’s going to go on to find another one, he’s going to arrive at the same place as Troy.

Wilson further explained that ‘There aren’t many people who ever jumped up in Troy’s face’ and that the father is so ‘proud of the kid at the same time that he expresses a hurt that all men feel. You got to cut our kid loose at some
point’ (*Conversations* 32–3). It is difficult to agree fully with the playwright. On the one hand, most in the audience understand the concept of parental tough love, the necessity to teach life lessons to children. This would be especially true for Cory, who is about to enter a Bigger Thomas-like naturalistic cosmos in which the individual is reduced to an insignificant speck in a universe over which he has little or no control. This is equally true for Lyons, whose musical aspirations are temporarily put on hold when he is imprisoned for three years for cashing ‘other people’s checks’ (94). We have to accept Wilson’s thought that Troy is expressing his love for his son throughout the play. On the other hand, in virtually every scene with his son Troy emerges as a model of pent-up rage, his anger and inability to understand his son’s point of view barely held in check. He also appears disdainful of most others, and he reduces his conception of mortality to little more than a clichéd baseball analogy. ‘That’s all death is to me,’ he patronizes Rose. ‘A fastball on the outside corner’ (10). He had rejected his own father years earlier because he regarded him as ‘the devil himself’ (52). In the climactic fight scene between father and son, Troy accuses Cory of having ‘the devil in you’ (87), but much the same could be said of Troy himself at that moment. At times it appears as if Troy experiences the self-alienation Julia Kristeva theorizes about when discussing the fear of the other, and which leads to a sense that we may become ‘foreigners to ourselves.’

Thus fences, in this play, do not make good neighbours; they divide. Fences symbolize separateness, otherness, an inability to communicate with the self and the other. Significantly enough, the nearly fatal father-son battle at the end of Act 2 scene 4 occurs in the front yard, near the fence. After Cory has tried to bash in his father’s head with the baseball bat, Troy screams, ‘Get your black ass out of my yard!’ (87) and a rejected and defeated Cory tells his father that he will be back to get his belongings, to which Troy replies, ‘They’ll be on the other side of that fence’ (89). This is one of several key emotional highpoints in the play, a moment in which Troy severs the bonds between father and son (as he had done, if we can believe his older son, with Lyons). Like Robert Frost’s fences, Wilson’s represent something that distances Troy from the other, and from the self. Although there is a somewhat sentimental and predictable Lorraine Hansberryan reconciliation at the play’s end, when Cory relents and agrees to attend his father’s funeral, from this confrontation near the fence on, Cory retreats from his family, joins the Marines, and tries, the text implies, to make a productive life for himself. Wilson claims that Troy loves his son – and ultimately the audience detects that love – but that same audience may also detect much resentment, misunderstanding, and ignorance within that love.
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Despite Troy’s shortcomings – his estrangement from his son, his affair with Alberta and his fathering of their child, Raynell, his pent-up anger, his sexism, and so on – Wilson mythicizes his protagonist. He necessarily bestows upon him an antiheroic status, but many in the audience see a man whose spirit radiates from his core being until his death, in 1965.

The source of much of his antiheroic status, and anger, is in a traumatic, transformative experience when he was fourteen years old. His father had discovered him with a thirteen-year-old girl, ‘real cozy with each other’ (52). His father had beaten him, but his real purpose, we learn, was less to discipline Troy than to rape the young woman: ‘But I see where he was chasing me off so he could have the gal for himself. When I see what the matter of it was, I lost all fear of my daddy’ (52). Troy sees in his father nothing less than the devil. In his account of his father’s attack, Wilson works carefully to construct an Oedipal texture to the struggle between father and son, for Troy suffers, if not a Sophoclean blinding, then a beating so savage, as Troy recalls, that

I thought I was blind. I couldn’t see nothing. Both my eyes were swollen shut.
I layed there and cried. I didn’t know what I was gonna do. The only thing I knew was the time had come for me to leave my daddy’s house. And right there the world suddenly got big. And it was a long time before I could cut it down to where I could handle it. (52–3)

This assault by his father transforms Troy, especially in terms of his being forced to stand up to authority figures, by thrusting him into a malevolent and racialized world.

Unsafe at home, Troy, as a young teenager, becomes a cosmic waif, drifting with little discernible purpose in a malevolent universe whose white values and culture systems remain inimical to a black boy walking 200 miles to Mobile, Alabama, in 1918. It is here that a homeless and jobless Troy turns to robbery, and then murder, which lands him in prison for the most formative years of his young life. Although the ever sensible Rose reasons, with reference to Raynell, whose mother Alberta has just died giving birth to her, that ‘you can’t visit the sins of the father upon the child’ (79), we also see, in the world Wilson constructs, that the sins of the past may very well be replicated in the present, if not the future. Hence Troy, with his sons Cory and Lyons, can only ponder the inevitability of their biological and spiritual destiny. These are men who remain vaguely aware that a replicating process ensures that the heritage propagated by their fathers and their fathers before them has been transferred to the sons through a seemingly ungovernable Darwinianism. The threat to future generations, Wilson implies, is a given:
‘There’s that sense of loss and separation. You find out how Troy left his house and you see how Cory leaves his house. I suspect with Cory it will repeat with some differences and maybe, after five or six generations, they’ll find a different way to do it.’ (Conversations 33).

Despite Troy’s formidable presence within the play (Wilson’s character descriptions relate all the other figures to Troy, i.e., Troy’s friend, Troy’s wife, Troy’s brother, and so on), Rose occupies the most central and civilizing role in the play. Although Troy’s circuitous language can be specific, that language also descends to the level of baseball banalities and clichés. Rose’s language, however, cuts through Troy’s rationalizations and highlights the truth. Linda Loman, in Death of a Salesman, cannot tell the truth directly to her husband. Rose Maxson can. She shows no evidence of evasion. Early in Act 2 in a scene that revolves around Troy’s affair with Alberta, Troy tells Rose that when he saw Alberta, ‘I got to thinking that if I tried . . . I just might be able to steal second . . . I stood on first base for eighteen years and I thought . . . well, goddamn it . . . go for it!’ Rose responds, ‘We’re not talking about baseball! We’re talking about you going off to lay in bed with another woman’ (70). Clearly Rose sets her sights on coming to terms with her husband’s dreams and his rhetoric of equivocation. More tellingly, the scene signals a key power shift in their relationship, a shift characterized by Rose’s assuming matriarchal control over her husband and extended family. It is a feminine control born out of an accepting love. As Rose says, ‘Okay, Troy . . . I’ll take care of your baby for you . . . ‘cause like you say . . . you can’t visit the sins of the father upon the child. A motherless child has got a hard time’ (79). Troy’s affair with another woman and the fathering of an illegitimate child, however, render him a ‘womanless man’ for the rest of his life (79).

James Earl Jones and Mary Alice, who played Troy and Rose in the 1985 Yale Repertory Theatre production, later recalled the cathartic effect that acting in Fences had on them. ‘The first time I watched the rehearsal of the last scene, I was crying – not just for what I should have been crying about,’ Jones related. ‘I was crying for all the times that I should have been watching it and hadn’t. There are three moments that trigger the ending catharsis: the moment when Rose acknowledges Troy has died, Cory’s tribute, and Gabe’s blowing the trumpet.’ Alice added, ‘Unlike Jimmy, I think I have a catharsis. I have mine at the top of the second act. I don’t feel it in the evening, but more when I wake up the next morning – then I feel drained.’ Finally, Jones concluded, ‘I think this play, this story, demands all of what this man is, and it asks its actors to make a commitment larger than you would make even in a Shakespeare play.’ Wilson’s catharsis produces a celebratory ending.
Wilson tempers the celebratory, however. He suggests that, despite the vitality of Rose and Troy and the reconciliation of Troy and Cory at the funeral which ends the play, there is a sense that the Maxsons remained entrapped. Indeed, as the playwright explained, each of the major characters in Fences is institutionalized. Rose is in a church. Lyons is in a penitentiary. Gabriel’s in a mental hospital and Cory’s in the marines. The only free person is the girl, Troy’s daughter, the hope for the future. That was conscious on my part because in ’57 that’s what I saw. Blacks have relied on institutions which are really foreign – except for the black church, which has been our saving grace.’ (Conversations 33)

Despite allusions to the institutionalization of the characters, however, Wilson ends the play with a sense of affirmation. In the final scene he mixes gestures of reconciliation, forgiveness and understanding to produce an image of family unity – and love. Music and song fill the stage. Gabriel adds a magical realism to the action in the final scene. An estranged son, thanks to motherly advice shorn of cliché, honours his father. This extended family unites, and, Wilson implies, despite his considerable flaws, Troy must be regarded, finally, as a noble, even heroic figure, a man who, despite his irresponsibility, understands the importance of self-reliance and social responsibility. His rise to heroism, Wilson said, ‘may be nothing more than his willingness to wrestle with his life, his willingness to engage no matter what the circumstances of his life. He hasn’t given up despite the twists and turns it’s given him. I find that both noble and heroic’ (Conversations 172). The epigraph the playwright provides at the start of the published version of Fences contextualizes the spirit of the play’s final sense of compassion, affirmation and forgiveness:

> 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.

Thus, by the play’s end, an earlier Barakian rage has yielded to a Hansberryan sense of renewal and hope. The family accord their flawed but finally heroic, noble, and lovable patriarch a proper and honourable funeral. Gabriel brings the play to its celebratory close when he blows into his trumpet. The trumpet produces no sound, yet Gabriel feels so passionately that Troy deserves full entry into heaven that, though baffled by the lack of sound, he wills Troy into salvation with his hypnotizing dance. For Wilson, Gabriel’s final dance movements of ‘atavistic signature and ritual’ (101) ensure that
the gates of heaven or, if one prefers, the fences of heaven, open wide for Troy Maxson.

NOTES