

AUGUST WILSON (b. 1945) was born in a slum in Pittsburgh and raised with his five brothers and sisters by his African American mother, Daisy Wilson, who supported her children by working as a janitor downtown in the county courthouse. His father, a white man, abandoned the family; Wilson remembered that he was "a sporadic presence in our house." Wilson was also nurtured by his stepfather, David Bedford, who worked in the city sewer department. Bedford had been a football star in high school but spent twenty-three years in prison after killing a man in a robbery attempt. Wilson credits his mother for teaching him about black pride. He tells a story about the time she won a brand-new Speed Queen washing machine in a radio competition. When the station discovered she was black, they substituted a certificate for a secondhand washer. Wilson's mother was doing her family's laundry at the sink in her home on a scrub board, but she refused the radio's offer rather than be treated so unfairly.

At age fifteen, Wilson dropped out of school, took a job running a freight elevator, and began to spend hours in the "Negro Section" of the Pittsburgh Public Library, where he read Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and James Baldwin. Back in Pittsburgh after three years in the army, he bought his first typewriter for twenty dollars and began to write poetry before gradually shifting over, on the advice of a friend, to writing plays. Wilson later told interviewer Will Haygood that what "pained" him enough to start his writing was the idea of African Americans streaming out of the South, trying to forget their past: "My mother came from North Carolina. And all my friends were always from someplace: Alabama, Georgia. And this is what happened invariably: One of my classmates would come to school and say, 'My grandmother died. And we got some land.' I'd say, 'When you gonna move?' They'd say, 'We gonna sell it.'" It was Wilson's belief that "we should have stayed in the South. We attempted to plant what in essence was an emerging culture, a culture that had grown out of our experience of two hundred years as slaves in the South. The cities of the urban North have not been hospitable. If we had stayed in the South, we could have strengthened the culture." In *Fences*, Wilson dramatizes the continuing struggle of African Americans to find good jobs and hold together families forty years after leaving the South in the "Great Migration" from 1910 to 1930, when the black population doubled and tripled in Pittsburgh, Chicago, and New York City.

In 1981 and 1982, the first professional productions of Wilson's plays were staged in little theaters in St. Paul and Pittsburgh. He also began sending his manuscripts to the Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference, which ran workshops to develop the talent of young American playwrights. The conference rejected his first plays but accepted his work-in-progress, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. "To this day," recalls Wilson, "that's about the highlight of my career."

With *Ma Rainey*, Wilson began his collaboration with the African American director of the Yale Repertory Theatre, Lloyd Richards, to whom he dedicated *Fences*: "For Lloyd Richards, who adds to whatever he touches." Wilson embarked on an ambitious ten-play cycle dramatizing different decades in the history of African Americans in the twentieth century. To date, the cycle consists of *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1983), set in 1911; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1981), set in 1927; *The Piano Lesson* (1986), set in 1936; *Seven Guitars* (1995), set in 1938; *Fences* (1983), set in 1957; and *Two Trains*

Running (1989), set in 1969. As critic John Lahr acknowledges, "No other theatrical testament to African American life has been so popular or so poetic or so penetrating." Wilson's plays have earned him two Pulitzer Prizes, three New York Drama Critics Circle Awards, one Tony Award, and one American Theater Critics' Association Award.

Wilson has dedicated himself as a playwright to writing a new history of black America, celebrating his people's African roots and humble beginnings instead of denying them. Such plays as *Fences* are well-

crafted dramas in the tradition of the European realistic theater, but Wilson also introduces elements of spontaneity into the stage action to express what he regards as the creative genius for improvisation in black culture. In the final scene of *Fences*, for example, Troy's brother Gabriel blows his trumpet and dances to open the gates of heaven so that Troy's spirit can enter, in an act Wilson describes as "a dance of atavistic signature and ritual." Wilson's inspiration for *Fences* was a collage by the African-American painter Romare Bearden called "Continuities," which depicts a man standing in his yard with a baby in his arms. When asked by television personality Bill Moyers if he ever grew "weary of thinking black, writing black, being asked questions about blacks," Wilson patiently replied, "How can one grow weary of that? Whites don't get tired of thinking white or being who they are.... Black is not limiting. There's no idea in the world that is not contained by black life. I could write forever about the black experience in America."

AUGUST WILSON

Fences 1987

characters

troy maxson

jim bono, Troy's friend

rose, Troy's wife

lyons, Troy's oldest son by previous marriage

gabriel, Troy's brother

cory, Troy and Rose's son

raynell, Troy's daughter

SETTING: The setting is the yard which fronts the only entrance to the Maxson household, an ancient two-story brick house set back off a small alley in a big-city neighborhood.

The entrance to the house is gained by two or three steps leading to a wooden porch badly in need of paint.

A relatively recent addition to the house and running its full width, the porch lacks congruence. It is a sturdy porch with a flat roof. One or two chairs of dubious value sit at one end where the kitchen window opens onto the porch. An old-fashioned icebox stands silent guard at the opposite end.

The yard is a small dirt yard, partially fenced, except for the last scene, with a wooden sawhorse, a pile of lumber, and other fence-building equipment set off to the side. Opposite is a tree from which hangs a ball made of rags. A baseball bat leans against the tree. Two oil drums serve as garbage receptacles and sit near the house at right to complete the setting.

THE PLAY: Near the turn of the century, the destitute of Europe sprang on the city with tenacious claws and an honest and solid dream. The city devoured them. They swelled its belly until it burst into a thousand furnaces and sewing machines, a thousand butcher shops and bakers' ovens, a thousand churches and hospitals and funeral parlors and money-lenders. The city grew. It nourished itself and offered each man a partnership limited only by his talent, his guile, and his willingness and capacity for hard work. For the immigrants of Europe, a dream dared and won true.

The descendants of African slaves were offered no such welcome or participation.

They came from places called the Carolinas and the Virginias, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee. They came strong, eager, searching. The city rejected them and they fled 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.

ACT I

SCENE I: It is 1957. Troy and Bono enter the yard, engaged in conversation. Troy is fifty-three years old, a large man with thick, heavy hands; it is this largeness that he strives to fill out and make an accommodation with. Together with his blackness, his largeness informs his sensibilities and the choices he has made in his life.

Of the two men, Bono is obviously the follower. His commitment to their friendship of thirty-odd years is rooted in his admiration of Troy's honesty, capacity for hard work, and his strength, which Bono seeks to emulate.

It is Friday night, payday, and the one night of the week the two men engage in a ritual of talk and drink. Troy is usually the most talkative and at times he can be crude and almost vulgar, though he is capable of rising to profound heights of expression. The men carry lunch buckets and wear or carry burlap aprons and are dressed in clothes suitable to their jobs as garbage collectors.

bono: Troy, you ought to stop that lying!

troy: I ain't lying! The nigger had a watermelon this big. (He indicates with his hands.)

Talking about...

“What watermelon, Mr. Rand?” I liked to fell out! “What watermelon, Mr. Rand?” ...And it sitting there big as life.

bono: What did Mr. Rand say?

troy: Ain't said nothing. Figure if the nigger too dumb to know he carrying a watermelon, he wasn't gonna get much sense out of him. Trying to hide that great big old watermelon under his coat. Afraid to let the white man see him carry it home.

bono: I'm like you...I ain't got no time for them kind of people.

troy: Now what he look like getting mad cause he see the man from the union talking to Mr. Rand?

bono: He come to me talking about...“Maxson gonna get us fired.” I told him to get away from me with that. He walked away from me calling you a troublemaker. What Mr. Rand say?

troy: Ain't said nothing. He told me to go down the Commissioner's office next Friday. They called me down there to see them.

bono: Well, as long as you got your complaint filed, they can't fire you. That's what one of them white fellows tell me.

troy: I ain't worried about them firing me. They gonna fire me cause I asked a question? That's all I did. I went to Mr. Rand and asked him, “Why? Why you got the white mens driving and the colored lifting?” Told him “what's the matter, don't I count? You think only white fellows got sense enough to drive a truck. That ain't no paper job! Hell, anybody can drive a truck. How come you got all whites driving and the colored lifting?” He told me “take it to the union.” Well, hell, that's what I done! Now they wanna come up with this pack of lies.

bono: I told Brownie if the man come and ask him any questions...just tell the truth! It ain't nothing but something they done trumped up on you cause you filed a complaint on them.

troy: Brownie don't understand nothing. All I want them to do is change the job description. Give everybody a chance to drive the truck. Brownie can't see that. He ain't got that much sense.

bono: How you figure he be making out with that gal be up at Taylors' all the time...that Alberta gal?

troy: Same as you and me. Getting just as much as we is. Which is to say nothing.

bono: It is, huh? I figure you doing a little better than me...and I ain't saying what I'm doing.

troy: Aw, nigger, took here...I know you. If you had got anywhere near that gal, twenty minutes later you be looking to tell somebody. And the first one you gonna tell...that you gonna want to brag to...is gonna be me.

bono: I ain't saying that. I see where you be eyeing her.

troy: I eye all the women. I don't miss nothing. Don't never let nobody tell you Troy Maxson don't eye the women.

bono: You been doing more than eyeing her. You done bought her a drink or two.

troy: Hell yeah, I bought her a drink! What that mean? I bought you one, too. What that mean cause I buy her a drink? I'm just being polite.

bono: It's all right to buy her one drink. That's what you call being polite. But when you wanna be buying two or three...that's what you call eyeing her.

troy: Look here, as long as you known me...you ever known me to chase after women?

bono: Hell yeah! Long as I done known you. You forgetting I knew you when.

troy: Naw, I'm talking about since I been married to Rose?

bono: Oh, not since you been married to Rose. Now, that's the truth, there. I can say that.

troy: All right then! Case closed.

bono: I see you be walking up around Alberta's house. You supposed to be at Taylors' and you be walking up around there.

troy: What you watching where I'm walking for? I ain't watching after you.

bono: I seen you walking around there more than once.

troy: Hell, you liable to see me walking anywhere! That don't mean nothing cause you see me walking around there.

bono: Where she come from anyway? She just kinda showed up one day.

troy: Tallahassee. You can look at her and tell she one of them Florida gals. They got some big healthy women down there. Grow them right up out the ground. Got a little bit of Indian in her. Most of them niggers down in Florida got some Indian in them.

bono: I don't know about that Indian part. But she damn sure big and healthy. Woman wear some big stockings. Got them great big old legs and hips as wide as the Mississippi River.

troy: Legs don't mean nothing. You don't do nothing but push them out of the way. But them hips cushion the ride!

bono: Troy, you ain't got no sense.

troy: It's the truth! Like you riding on Goodyears!

Rose enters from the house. She is ten years younger than Troy, her devotion to him stems from her recognition of the possibilities of her life without him: a succession of abusive men and their babies, a life of partying and running the streets, the Church, or aloneness with its attendant pain and frustration. She recognizes Troy's spirit as a fine and illuminating one and she either ignores or forgives his faults, only some of which she recognizes. Though she doesn't drink, her presence is an integral part of the Friday night rituals. She alternates between the porch and the kitchen, where supper preparations are under way.

rose: What you all out here getting into?

troy: What you worried about what we getting into for? This is men talk, woman.

rose: What I care what you all talking about? Bono, you gonna stay for supper?

bono: No, I thank you, Rose. But Lucille say she cooking up a pot of pigfeet.

troy: Pigfeet! Hell, I'm going home with you! Might even stay the night if you got some pigfeet. You got something in there to top them pigfeet, Rose?

rose: I'm cooking up some chicken. I got some chicken and collard greens.

troy: Well, go on back in the house and let me and Bono finish what we was talking about. This is men talk. I got some talk for you later. You know what kind of talk I mean. You go on and powder it up.

rose: Troy Maxson, don't you start that now!

troy (puts his arm around her): Aw, woman...come here. Look here, Bono...when I met this woman...I got out that place, say, "Hitch up my pony, saddle up my mare...there's a woman out there for me somewhere. I looked here. Looked there. Saw Rose and latched on to her." I latched on to her and told her—I'm gonna tell you the truth—I told her, "Baby, I don't wanna marry, I just wanna be your man." Rose told me...tell him what you told me, Rose.

rose: I told him if he wasn't the marrying kind, then move out the way so the marrying kind could find me.

troy: That's what she told me. "Nigger, you in my way. You blocking the view! Move out the way so I can find me a husband." I thought it over two or three days. Come back—

rose: Ain't no two or three days nothing. You was back the same night.

troy: Come back, told her..."Okay, baby...but I'm gonna buy me a banty rooster and put him out there in the backyard...and when he see a stranger come, he'll flap his wings and crow..." Look here, Bono, I could watch the front door by myself...it was that back door I was worried about.

rose: Troy, you ought not talk like that. Troy ain't doing nothing but telling a lie.

troy: Only thing is...when we first got married...forget the rooster...we ain't had no yard!

bono: I hear you tell it. Me and Lucille was staying down there on Logan Street. Had two rooms with the outhouse in the back. I ain't mind the outhouse none. But when that goddamn wind blow through there in the winter...that's what I'm talking about! To this day I wonder why in the hell I ever stayed down there for six long years. But see, I didn't know I could do no better. I thought only white folks had inside toilets and things.

rose: There's a lot of people don't know they can do no better than they doing now. That's just something you got to learn. A lot of folks still shop at Bella's.

troy: Ain't nothing wrong with shopping at Bella's. She got fresh food.

rose: I ain't said nothing about if she got fresh food. I'm talking about what she charge. She charge ten cents more than the A&P.

troy: The A&P ain't never done nothing for me. I spends my money where I'm treated right. I go down to Bella, say, "I need a loaf of bread, I'll pay you Friday." She give it to me. What sense that make when I got money to go and spend it somewhere else and ignore the person who done right by me? That ain't in the Bible.

rose: We ain't talking about what's in the Bible. What sense it make to shop there when she overcharge?

troy: You shop where you want to. I'll do my shopping where the people been good to me.

rose: Well, I don't think it's right for her to overcharge. That's all I was saying.

bono: Look here...I got to get on. Lucille going be raising all kind of hell.

troy: Where you going, nigger? We ain't finished this pint. Come here, finish this pint.

bono: Well, hell, I am...if you ever turn the bottle loose.

troy (hands him the bottle): The only thing I say about the A&P is I'm glad Cory got that job down there. Help him take care of his school clothes and things. Gabe done moved out and things getting tight around here. He got that job.... He can start to look out for himself.

rose: Cory done went and got recruited by a college football team.

troy: I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football. I told him when he first come to me with it. Now you come telling me he done went and got more tied up in it. He ought to go and get recruited in how to fix cars or something where he can make a living.

rose: He ain't talking about making no living playing football. It's just something the boys in school do. They gonna send a recruiter by to talk to you. He'll tell you he ain't talking about making no living playing football. It's a honor to be recruited.

troy: It ain't gonna get him nowhere. Bono'll tell you that.

bono: If he be like you in the sports...he's gonna be all right. Ain't but two men ever played baseball as good as you. That's Babe Ruth and Josh Gibson.° Them's the only two men ever hit more home runs than you.

troy: What it ever get me? Ain't got a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.

rose: Times have changed since you was playing baseball, Troy. That was before the war. Times have changed a lot since then.

troy: How in hell they done changed?

rose: They got lots of colored boys playing ball now. Baseball and football.

bono: You right about that, Rose. Times have changed, Troy. You just come along too early.

troy: There ought not never have been no time called too early! Now you take that fellow...what's that fellow they had playing right field for the Yankees back then? You know who I'm talking about, Bono. Used to play right field for the Yankees.

rose: Selkirk?

troy: Selkirk! That's it! Man batting .269, understand? .269. What kind of sense that make? I was hitting .432 with thirty-seven home runs! Man batting .269 and playing right field for the Yankees! I saw Josh Gibson's daughter yesterday. She walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet. Now I bet you Selkirk's daughter ain't walking around with raggedy shoes on her feet! I bet you that!

rose: They got a lot of colored baseball players now. Jackie Robinson was the first. Folks had to wait for Jackie Robinson.

troy: I done seen a hundred niggers play baseball better than Jackie Robinson. Hell, I know some teams Jackie Robinson couldn't even make! What you talking about Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson wasn't nobody. I'm talking about if you could play ball then they ought to have let you play. Don't care what color you were. Come telling me I come along too early. If you could play...then they ought to have let you play.

Troy takes a long drink from the bottle.

rose: You gonna drink yourself to death. You don't need to be drinking like that.

troy: Death ain't nothing. I done seen him. Done wrassled with him. You can't tell me nothing about death. Death ain't nothing but a fastball on the outside corner. And you know what I'll do to that! Lookee here, Bono...am I lying? You get one of them fastballs, about waist high, over the outside corner of the plate where you can get the meat of the bat on it...and good god! You can kiss it goodbye. Now, am I lying?

bono: Naw, you telling the truth there. I seen you do it.

troy: If I'm lying...that 450 feet worth of lying! (Pause.) That's all death is to me. A fastball on the outside corner.

rose: I don't know why you want to get on talking about death.

troy: Ain't nothing wrong with talking about death. That's part of life. Everybody gonna die. You gonna die, I'm gonna die. Bono's gonna die. Hell, we all gonna die.

rose: But you ain't got to talk about it. I don't like to talk about it.

troy: You the one brought it up. Me and Bono was talking about baseball...you tell me I'm gonna drink myself to death. Ain't that right, Bono? You know I don't drink this but one night out of the week. That's Friday night. I'm gonna drink just enough to where I can handle it. Then I cuts it loose. I leave it alone. So don't you worry about me drinking myself to death. 'Cause I ain't worried about Death. I done seen him. I done wrestled with him. Look here, Bono...I looked up one day and Death was marching straight at me. Like Soldiers on Parade! The Army of Death was marching straight at me. The middle of July, 1941. It got real cold just like it be winter. It seem like Death himself reached out and touched me on the shoulder. He touch me just like I touch you. I got cold as ice and Death standing there grinning at me.

rose: Troy, why don't you hush that talk.

troy: I say... What you want, Mr. Death? You be wanting me? You done brought your army to be getting me? I looked him dead in the eye. I wasn't fearing nothing. I was ready to tangle. Just like I'm ready to tangle now. The Bible say be ever vigilant. That's why I don't get but so drunk. I got to keep watch.

rose: Troy was right down there in Mercy Hospital. You remember he had pneumonia? Laying there with a fever talking plumb out of his head.

troy: Death standing there staring at me...carrying that sickle in his hand. Finally he say, "You want bound over for another year?" See, just like that..."You want bound over for another year?" I told him, "Bound over hell! Let's settle this now!" It seem like he kinda fell back when I said that, and all the cold went out of me. I reached down and grabbed that sickle and threw it just as far as I could throw it...and me and him commenced to wrestling. We wrestled for three days and three nights. I can't say where I found the strength from. Every time it seemed like he was gonna get the best of me, I'd reach way down deep inside myself and find the strength to do him one better.

rose: Every time Troy tell that story he find different ways to tell it. Different things to make up about it.

troy: I ain't making up nothing. I'm telling you the facts of what happened. I wrestled with Death for three days and three nights and I'm standing here to tell you about it. (Pause.) All right. At the end of the third night we done weakened each other to where we can't hardly move. Death stood up, throwed on his robe...had him a white robe with a hood on it. He throwed on that robe and went off to look for his sickle. Say, "I'll be back." Just like that. "I'll be back." I told him, say, "Yeah, but...you gonna have to find

me!" I wasn't no fool. I wan't going looking for him. Death ain't nothing to play with. And I know he's gonna get me. I know I got to join his army...his camp followers. But as long as I keep my strength and see him coming...as long as I keep up my vigilance...he's gonna have to fight to get me. I ain't going easy.

bono: Well, look here, since you got to keep up your vigilance...let me have the bottle.

troy: Aw hell, I shouldn't have told you that part. I should have left out that part.

rose: Troy be talking that stuff and half the time don't even know what he be talking about.

troy: Bono know me better than that.

bono: That's right. I know you. I know you got some Uncle Remus^o in your blood. You got more stories than the devil got sinners.

troy: Aw hell, I done seen him too! Done talked with the devil.

rose: Troy, don't nobody wanna be hearing all that stuff.