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and Alabama Shakespeare Festival Present

# AUGUST WILSON'S FENCES



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IN THE HEART OF ATL

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# STUDY GUIDE

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## About August Wilson

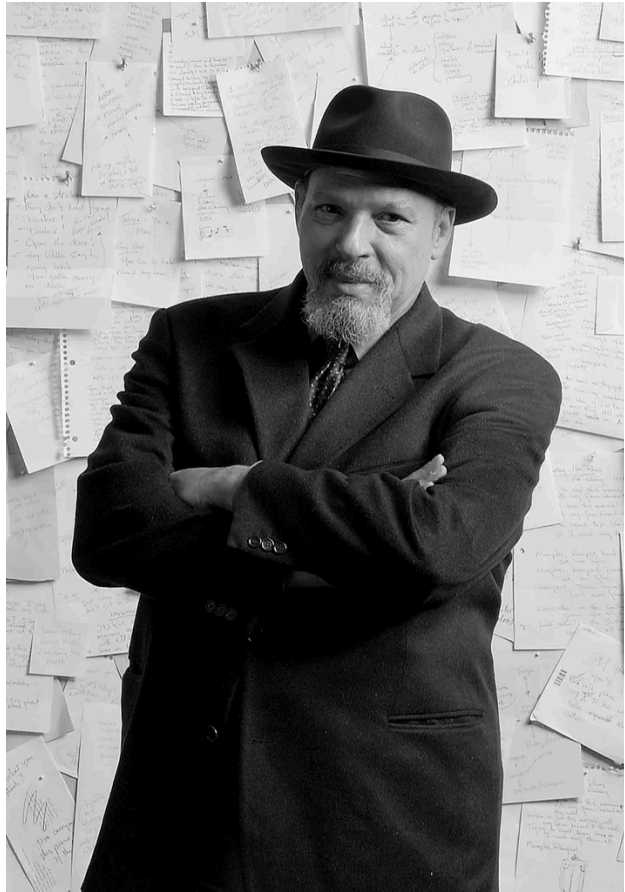
Playwright August Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1945. He was the fourth of six children. His mother, Daisy Wilson, was of African American heritage. His father was a German immigrant named Frederick Kittel.

As a child, August attended St. Richard's Parochial School. When his parents divorced, he, 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, August 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 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.





James Earl Jones, Mary Alice, and Ray Aranha in the 1987 Broadway production of *Fences*

Set in the 1950s, *Fences* explores the themes of the ever-evolving black experience and race relations in America. It was the sixth of the playwright's 10-part series called "The American Century Cycle." The plays that make up the cycle are as follows:

- 1900s *Gem of the Ocean*
- 1910s *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
- 1920s *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
- 1930s *The Piano Lesson*
- 1940s *Seven Guitars*
- 1950s *Fences*
- 1960s *Two Trains Running*
- 1970s *Jitney*
- 1980s *King Hedley II*
- 1990s *Radio Golf*

In 1994, Wilson married for the third time, to costume designer Constanza Romero. *Seven Guitars* made its way to the Broadway stage two years later, which was 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 play, *Radio Golf*, had opened in Los Angeles, California, just a few months earlier.



*Fences* is a small but significant contribution to a long lineage of Black American dramatic texts, institutions, and individual theatre practitioners. The timeline that follows shows where *Fences* sits within that lineage:

### **African American Theatre Timeline**

1816 - William Henry Brown starts the African Company in New York. This company attracts white patrons and serves as a training ground for some of the first African American Shakespearean actors.

1823 - William Henry Brown writes and produces *King Shotaway*, the first play publicly produced by an African American. The play is based on a slave rebellion on the island of St. Vincent which, at the time, was under British rule. The production starred James Hewlett and Ira Aldridge.

1848 - Blackface minstrel shows become popular, translating formal art such as opera into more popular terms for a general audience. Minstrel shows portray African Americans as dim-witted, lazy, buffoonish, superstitious, happy-go-lucky, and musical.

1916 - *Rachel*, by Angelina Weld Grimke, is considered the first successful African American play for its protest of *The Birth of a Nation* — a film famous for its technical achievement and infamous for its overtly racist message.

1921 - *Shuffle Along* is the first musical written, produced, and performed by African American theatre artists on Broadway.

1935 - Langston Hughes' play, *Mulatto*, debuts on Broadway. It is the first African American musical on Broadway to be a commercial success.

1940 - American Negro Theatre (ANT) and Negro Playwrights' Company (NPC) are established as an outgrowth of the Federal Theatre Project (FTP). NPC members include Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, and Edna Thomas.

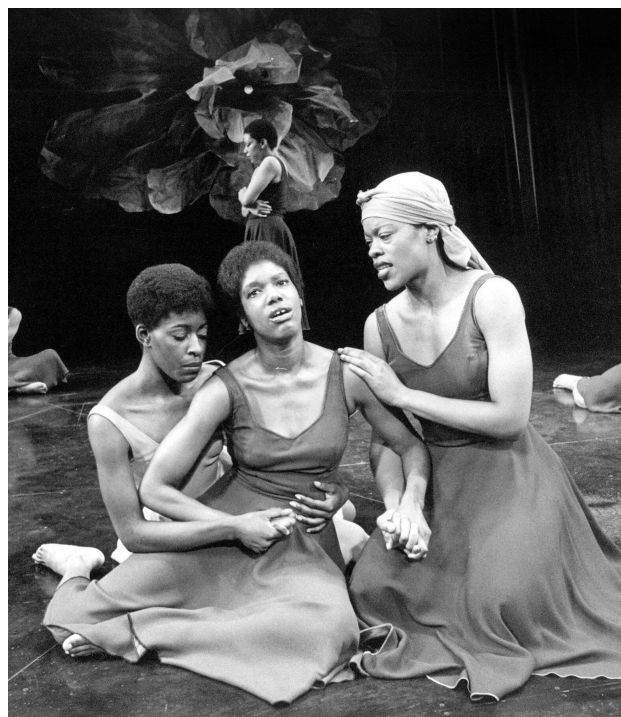
1944 - The Library Theatre, located in Harlem produces *Anna Lucasta* by Philip Yordan with an all-African American cast on Broadway.



Mercedes Gilbert and James Kirkwood in the original 1936 Broadway Production of *Mulatto*, by Langston Hughes



Diana Sands, Claudia McNeil, and Ed Hall in the Original Broadway Production of Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun"



Sharita Hunt, Robbie McCauley and Rise Collins in the Broadway production of Ntozake Shange's "For Colored Girls,"

1955 - *Trouble in Mind* is produced at the Greenwich Mews and wins the Obie Award for best Off-Broadway play, making playwright Alice Childress the first African American woman to be awarded the honor.

1959 - Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* debuts on Broadway. Hansberry becomes the first African American woman to have a play on Broadway. The play reveals the struggles associated with black identity and the related roadblocks to achieving the American Dream. This show also becomes one of the markers of the beginning of the Black Theatre Movement and Black Arts Movement.

1965 - Amiri Baraka (originally LeRoi Jones) establishes the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem. He inspires artists like playwright Ed Bullins to create a strong "black aesthetic" in American theatre.

1967 - Douglas Turner Ward, Robert Hooks, and Gerald S. Crone become the founders of the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC), a New York based theatre company that focused on original work with themes that centered the Black experience. Many of its alum go on to become some of the most lauded and influential Black artists on stage, screen, and television in the final decades of the 20th century.

1975 - Ntozake Shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* becomes the 2nd play by a Black woman to be produced on Broadway. She also creates a new theatrical medium, the chore poem, that incorporates poetry, dance, and music in the exploration of non-traditional narrative. The play is later adapted into a film by Tyler Perry (2010).

**1983 - August Wilson receives the Pulitzer Prize for his play, *Fences*. This honor is awarded to him again in 1990 for his play, *The Piano Lesson***



Charles S. Dutton and Rocky Carroll in the Original Broadway Production of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

1983 - The touring production of *Mama, I Want to Sing* by Ken Wydro and Vy Higginsen re-invigorates the traditional music touring circuit, colloquially known as the “chitlin circuit,” which brings Black productions to predominantly Black cities across America. The success of these commercial productions creates a template that inspires several Black independent producers like Tyler Perry and David E. Talbert who will eventually branch out from plays to achieve much success as film and television producers.

1990 - Suzan-Lori Parks wins her first Obie Award for her play *Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom*. Her subsequent awards include the 1996 Pulitzer for *Venus*, the 2002 Pulitzer for *Topdog/Underdog*, and the 2014 Obie for *Father Comes Home from the Wars Parts 1, 2, & 3*.

2009 - Lynn Nottage wins her first Pulitzer Prize for her play, *Ruined*, and wins the award again for her 2017 play, *Sweat*, tying her with August Wilson for wins of this prestigious award.

2020 - During the height of the COVID pandemic and the summer of “racial reckoning” in America, theatre artists create the document “We See You, White American Theatre,” which highlights the challenges that American artists of color face in contemporary theatre. The document also offers suggestions on how theaters can become more equitable in the future. In 2021, seven plays by Black playwrights “reopen” Broadway as the pandemic begins its decline.

## Exploratory Questions and Activities for *Fences*

### 1.) Activity One- “*The Starting Line*”

To build community, the students will be invited to share aloud their earliest memory of a time they felt the freedom to make their own choice about something important to them.

- I. Students will free write about a time in their life when they felt their right to self-determination, or the right to choose their own path, was limited by some aspect of their identity (e.g. gender, age, culture, race).
  - Tell students they will be discussing their writing with a partner. Be sure to give students some low-risk examples they might have experienced. Perhaps they’ve had an experience where a parent or caregiver didn’t let them see a movie they wanted to see based on age? Perhaps they weren’t allowed to play a sport because it was only offered to one gender in their community or school?
  - If students want to share a more high-risk, personal example, remind them that they will discuss this with a classmate. They should only share what they feel comfortable sharing. Classmates also should be reminded to listen with respect and compassion.
- II. Students discuss their experiences with a partner. Remind students to share only what they feel comfortable sharing. Remind classmates to practice active, respectful listening during the sharing.
- III. Partners will be invited to volunteer to share with the class at large. Again, remind the students to practice active, respectful listening.

### 2.) Troy vs. Cory: Two Generations, Two Americas

Troy and Cory encounter America at different historical moments. Troy's experience with baseball profoundly shapes his understanding of what is possible for a Black man, while Cory sees football as a possible pathway toward a different future.

- I. Research the opportunities available to Black athletes during Troy's generation and compare them with those available to a young Black athlete like Cory in the 1950s.
- II. Then examine the major confrontations between Troy and Cory. Consider:
  - Is Troy protecting Cory from a racist system he understands better than his son, or is he preventing Cory from entering a world that has begun to change? Can both things be true?
  - Identify textual evidence supporting both Troy's and Cory's perspectives before developing your own interpretation.
- III. Performance Experiment
  - In pairs, stage a section of a Troy/Cory confrontation twice.  
**Version One:** Perform the scene as though Troy's primary motivation is **protection**.  
**Version Two:** Perform the same scene as though Troy's primary motivation is **control**.
  - Change only performance choices—tempo, gesture, physical distance, vocal dynamics, pauses, eye contact, etc.—not Wilson's words.



### 3.) **Rose's Fences: Gender, Family and Invisible Labor**

Shift the center of *Fences* away from Troy and examine the play temporarily as though Rose was its protagonist.

- I. Create a timeline of Rose's journey through the play. For each major moment, identify:
  - What does Rose want? What prevents her from getting it? What does she sacrifice? What power does she possess?
- II. Then analyze the Maxson household as a social institution. Identify the forms of labor performed by Troy and Rose, including labor that may not be financially compensated: wage labor, domestic labor, caregiving, parenting, emotional labor, and maintaining family/community relationships.
  - Use evidence from the text to explore:
    - How do gender and economic structures determine whose labor is visible and whose sacrifices are expected?
    - Pay particular attention to Rose's confrontation with Troy following the revelation of his affair.

### 4.) **Troy Maxson—What shaped him?**

- I. In small groups, students will read aloud scenes from *Fences* that address Troy's experiences with discrimination and his limits to self-determination. What do these scenes reveal about Troy's worldviews and the relationships he forms with his family and friends?
- II. The class will discuss how Troy's experiences put him at a different place on "the starting line" from the white men in his same circumstances, in baseball and as a sanitation worker.
- III. As a closing exercise, students will view the photo depicting 1968 Sanitation Workers holding signs with the words "I am a Man" made famous during the strike. Responding in the voice of Troy Maxson, what might he say about the image?



### 5.) What Gets Inherited? Mapping the Maxson Cycle

Troy tells stories about his father. Cory struggles against Troy. Raynell will grow up carrying a family history she did not create. Across generations, Wilson asks us to consider what children inherit beyond money or property.

#### I. Construct an Inheritance Map connecting:

Troy's father - Troy - Cory/Raynell

- Trace at least four kinds of inheritance through the family:
  - material/economic inheritance
  - racial and historical inheritance
  - emotional inheritance
  - behavioral inheritance

For each, identify something that is *passed down*, something that is *resisted*, and something that is *transformed*.

#### II. Then investigate Wilson's structural choice to move the final scene forward several years to the day of Troy's funeral.

- Why doesn't Wilson show us Troy's death? Why does he instead show us the world that remains after him?
- Examine Cory's initial refusal to attend the funeral and his encounter with Raynell. What does their shared performance of Troy's old song suggest about memory and inheritance?

## **Georgia Performance Standards**

### Social Studies Standards (9-12)

SSSocSC4 Analyze the function of social institutions as agents of social control across differing societies and times.

- a. Analyze the function of social institutions in society, include: family, education, religion, economy, government/politics, health care, and media.
- b. Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various social institutions.
- c. Evaluate other possible social institutions such as sports.
- d. Analyze the functions and inequalities of the criminal justice system in relationship to a society's construct of crime and punishment.
- e. Explain the role of total institutions.
- f. Analyze the re-socialization process.

SSSocIC1 Analyze forms of social inequality.

- a. Explain how unequal distribution of power and resources affects the life chances of individuals in that society.
- b. Analyze the sources and effects of stratification on the basis of social class, race and ethnicity, gender, age, and emotional, mental, and physical disabilities.
- c. Analyze the sources of global stratification and inequality.
- d. Evaluate the impact of global stratification and inequality on global relations.

### Dramatic Writing Standards (9-12)

TAHSTL.RE.1 Evaluate various aspects of dramatic arts literature using appropriate supporting evidence.

- a. Compare and summarize theatre literature from various historical periods, cultures, and styles.
- b. Develop and apply a set of comprehensive criteria for theatre text analysis.
- c. Compare and contrast theatre texts to live/film performance.
- d. 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 (e.g., how the language evokes a sense of time and place; how it sets a formal or informal tone.)
- e. Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text, order events within it (e.g., parallel plots), and manipulate time (e.g., pacing, flashbacks) create such effects as mystery, tension, or surprise.

### English Language Arts Standards (9-12)

ELAGSE9-10RL9 Analyze how an author draws on and transforms source material in a specific work.

ELAGSE9-10W9 Draw evidence from literary or informational texts to support analysis, reflection, and research.

ELAGSE11-12RL3 Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

ELAGSE11-12RL4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful.

#### Performing Standards (9-12)

TAHSA.PR.1 Act and direct by communicating and sustaining roles within a variety of situations and environments.

- a. Examine and implement the voice, body, observation, and imagination as tools of the actor in presentations of formal and informal theatre.
- b. Research and assess the development of acting skills for character creation and performance including historical movements, personal experience, and cultural influences.
- c. Act by developing, communicating, and sustaining roles within a variety of situations and environments.
- d. Identify and examine the responsibilities and tasks of an actor in relationship with directors, designers, and technical crew.
- e. Use the skills and tools of a director to conduct rehearsals for performance.