

Headlong

LEEDS PLAYHOUSE

Lyric

HOME

AUGUST WILSON
FENCES

Directed by DANIEL BAXLEY

EDUCATION RESOURCES

OVERVIEW & CONTENTS

This education resource has been created by the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre and Headlong. We are committed to deepening and nurturing young people's understanding of theatre and the arts. We aim to raise the cultural aspirations of young people and make theatre accessible to all. With this in mind, this education resource is designed for teachers and Drama students. This resource is written from a theatre maker's perspective and we hope it provides some interesting insights into how a production like *Fences* is created and performed.

***Fences* is a Lyric Hammersmith Theatre, Headlong, Leeds Playhouse and HOME Manchester production.**



This pack is produced by the Lyric Hammersmith Theatre and Headlong for education purposes only. It is not for commercial use.

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THE LEGACY OF AUGUST WILSON

by Lynette Carr Armstrong and Samantha Wharton

Samantha and Lynette are teachers, writers and education consultants with over 50 years of combined experience in secondary education. They have extensive experience in developing innovative approaches to teaching literature and drama and have collaborated with Nick Hern and Penguin to produce study guides for new texts on the GCSE syllabus, as well as producing materials for Lit in Colour.

August Wilson (1945 – 2005)

TIMELINE

- 1945** Born on 27 April in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.
- 1983** Began writing *Fences*.
- 1985** *Fences* was first performed. It was the second play in Wilson's ten-play Pittsburgh Cycle.
- 1987** *Fences* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.
- 1987** *Fences* won four Tony Awards: Best Play, Best Actor, Best Featured Actress and Best Direction.
- 2005** Died on 2 October
- 2016** *Fences* was adapted into a feature film, directed by and starring Denzel Washington, alongside Viola Davis.
- 2017** Viola Davis won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her performance as Rose Maxson in *Fences*. The film also received Golden Globe and BAFTA recognition.



Ray Fearon
Credit: Tyler Fayose

ROOTS AND INFLUENCES

At the age of 14, Wilson discovered the ‘Negro’ section of the Carnegie library, an experience that changed the trajectory of his life. This segregated provision reflected the wider system of racial segregation under Jim Crow, legally reinforced by the Supreme Court’s 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which established the principle of ‘separate but equal’. In practice, Black Americans were frequently excluded from public libraries or provided with separate, less well-resourced facilities.

He was also inspired by the elders in his community, whose stories, knowledge and experiences shaped his understanding of identity and history. His mother did not initially see writing as a viable profession, but Wilson continued to pursue his creative path.

During the 1960s, Wilson became involved in the Black Power movement, a social and political movement that emerged against the backdrop of Jim Crow Laws, segregation, systemic racism, and racial inequality that

continued to disempower and disenfranchise Black Americans. Black Power advocated racial pride, self-reliance, community solidarity and the development of Black political and economic power. These principles further shaped Wilson’s understanding of race, culture, identity and representation.

Although Wilson was of mixed heritage, he strongly identified as a Black man. He reflected that being raised by an African American mother and socialised within Black communities shaped his sense of identity and belonging. He recognised that the social barriers and experiences faced by Black Americans were also his own:

“Whatever was closed to them was closed to me.”

His cultural upbringing was rooted in Black communities, while his father, who was only sporadically present during his childhood, had limited influence on his early life.

THE WRITING PROCESS

For Wilson, writing was a spiritual art form. The beauty of the blank page lay in the act of pouring words onto it and continually refining his craft.

Music, particularly the blues and jazz, profoundly shaped his artistic vision, with John Coltrane’s improvisational style influencing his creative process. Wilson described writing as a process in which “writing is rewriting”, viewing revision as an artistic battlefield of refining, removing and reimagining his work.

Beyond music, Wilson drew inspiration from Jorge Luis Borges’ ability to tell deeply specific stories that resonated with universal themes; Amiri Baraka’s belief that all art is inherently political; and Romare Bearden’s rich depictions of everyday Black life.

Wilson also believed that understanding personal and family histories, and maintaining a connection with previous generations, was essential to creating authentic stories.



Madeline Appiah and Ray Fearon
Credit: Tyler Fayose

AUGUST WILSON'S PLACE IN THE CANON OF AMERICAN PLAYRIGHTS

The new production of this important work by August Wilson offers educators across schools, academia and theatre an opportunity to explore Wilson's place within the canon of American playwrights. In the UK, there has been a concerted effort to introduce a range of writers from the Global Majority to the English / drama curriculum, however, Wilson's work has largely been overlooked.

Many of the writers introduced to examination syllabuses in recent years have been British, reflecting an expanding understanding of Britishness and an increasing recognition of the diverse range of cultural experiences that contribute to British society. However, this does not limit the opportunities for *Fences* to be explored alongside a wide range of texts and writers. The play offers rich possibilities for drawing parallels and contrasts with other works, playwrights and theatrical traditions.

Wilson's trajectory as a playwright is extraordinary. *Fences* was his second play within the Pittsburgh Cycle, his ambitious project to write a play for each decade of the 20th century, exploring the Black American experience. With the exception of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, all of the plays in the cycle are set in Pittsburgh.

Fences begins in 1957, as the 1950s draw to a close. This was a significant period in American history, following the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision in 1954, which challenged racial segregation in public schools, and the brutal murder of 14-year-old Emmett Till in the same year. These events formed part of a period of significant social and political change that would lead into the intensification of the Civil Rights Movement.

Wilson began writing *Fences* in 1983. The play received support from Yale University before moving rapidly towards Broadway, where it achieved significant critical and commercial success. Its Pulitzer Prize for Drama and Tony Award wins further established Wilson as a major voice in American theatre. His early reception, recognition and subsequent body of work were increasingly studied and celebrated by theatre practitioners, critics and academics.

The growing body of critical scholarship surrounding Wilson's life and work is testament to his continuing significance. His plays have generated numerous academic studies, educational resources and study guides, suggesting an expanding recognition of his importance across the educational spectrum.

Wilson has sometimes been described as the "Black Shakespeare", a comparison that reflects the extraordinary status he has achieved within American theatre and the distinctive power of his language. The phrase has been used by actors, educators and commentators, including Samuel L. Jackson and Brian Anthony Wilson. However, the comparison is also worth interrogating: Wilson developed a distinctive theatrical language and dramatic world rooted in Black American experience, and his work can be understood on its own terms rather than solely through comparison with Shakespeare.

Comparisons have also been drawn between Troy Maxson and characters created by other major American playwrights, particularly in relation to themes of masculinity, aspiration, family and social expectation. These comparisons provide useful starting points for students considering how Wilson's characters sit within the wider tradition of American drama.

FENCES ON SCREEN

Fences was widely acclaimed, and Paramount acquired the rights to adapt the play for film in the late 1980s. However, Wilson was determined to retain creative control over his work and was particularly committed to ensuring that a Black director was appointed to the project.

The eventual film adaptation was produced after Wilson's death in 2005 and released in 2016. Directed by Denzel Washington, who also reprised his Broadway performance as Troy Maxson, the film starred Viola Davis as Rose

Maxson. Washington's commitment to Wilson's work and the involvement of a predominantly Black creative team helped bring Wilson's vision to a much wider international audience.

The film's success also demonstrated the continued cultural and commercial relevance of Wilson's work. However, the significance of *Fences* extends beyond its success as a film. The play had already demonstrated its capacity to engage audiences with questions about race, identity, family and the human experience.

THE UNIVERSAL AND THE SPECIFIC

Even before the film adaptation, *Fences* demonstrated considerable potential for universal appeal. Wilson was deeply committed to exploring the Black American experience, but the play also responds to a wider question: can writers create characters whose experiences are rooted in a specific cultural and historical context while still speaking to audiences across different cultures?

Through Troy, Wilson creates a character whose experiences emerge directly from the social, cultural and historical realities of Black America. At the same time, Wilson explores universal human experiences, including loss, relationships, love, betrayal, responsibility and masculinity.

These themes transcend race and can speak to audiences from a wide range of backgrounds. They allow audiences to empathise with Troy, Rose and their sons, while also encouraging them to consider the ways in which their own experiences might connect with the characters.

The international reception of *Fences* provides further evidence of this potential. Productions in both China and Ghana demonstrate that audiences can connect with the central relationships and themes, even if their own lived experiences differ to the Black American experience.

Instead, these productions have found ways to engage with the universality of Wilson's characters and storytelling while recognising the cultural context from which the play emerges.



Everal A. Walsh.
Credit: Tyler Fayose

EXPLORING FENCES

There is therefore an enormous amount to unpack within Wilson's *Fences*. The play offers multiple ways of exploring its characters, relationships, themes and theatrical possibilities.

Questions surrounding family, motherhood, fatherhood, marriage, friendship, racism, class, literacy, access, generational trauma, rehabilitation, migration and war can all provide valuable starting points for discussion and practical exploration.

This new production, alongside the accompanying educational resources, provides further opportunities to explore Wilson's writing, theatrical influences and continuing relevance. It also encourages students to consider how a play rooted in a particular historical and cultural context can continue to challenge, move and engage audiences today.

PLAY SYNOPSIS

CHARACTERS

Troy Maxson

A 53-year-old African American man who works as a refuse (rubbish) collector. He is strong-willed, proud, and bitter about the racism and missed opportunities he experienced in his life.

Rose Maxson

Troy's wife and is devoted to her family. She is fiercely loyal despite the heartbreak and betrayal she experiences through the actions of Troy.

Cory Maxson

Troy and Rose's teenage son. He wants to play college football, but Troy discourages him because he believes sports will not lead Cory to success due to racism.

Lyons Maxson

Troy's older son from a previous relationship. He wants to become a musician and struggles financially. Troy often criticises him for not having a traditional job.

Gabriel (Gabe) Maxson

Troy's younger brother and a World War II veteran who suffered a brain injury during World War II.

Jim Bono

Troy's best friend and co-worker. He is loyal to Troy but also serves as a voice of reason.

Alberta

Troy's mistress. She is not seen on stage, but her relationship with Troy has a major impact on the family.

Raynell Maxson

Troy and Alberta's daughter. Rose raises her after Alberta dies, and she represents a new generation and the possibility of hope.

**SPOILER
ALERT!**

**SPOILER ALERT - ONLY READ THIS ONCE
YOU HAVE SEEN THE PRODUCTION!**

Fences follows Troy Maxson, a former baseball player who struggles with the disappointments of his past and his difficult relationship with his family. Troy's experiences with racism have made him bitter and determined to protect his son, Cory, from what he believes are unrealistic dreams. However, his strict attitude creates conflict between them. The play explores themes of family, racism, responsibility, dreams, and generational conflict, showing how Troy's choices affect the people closest to him.

ACT 1

Act 1 introduces Troy Maxson and his family as he struggles with his past and his responsibilities as a husband and father. Troy's son Cory wants to pursue a career in football, but Troy refuses to support him because he

believes racism will prevent Cory from succeeding. Troy also reveals that he has been unfaithful to his wife, Rose, creating serious tension within the family. The act focuses on Troy's difficult past, his relationship with his family, and the conflict between his dreams and those of his children.

ACT 2

In Act 2, the consequences of Troy's actions become clear. Rose is deeply hurt after discovering Troy's affair and his daughter Raynell is born as a result. Cory's relationship with Troy becomes increasingly hostile, eventually leading Cory to leave home. Years later, Troy dies, and the family comes together for his funeral. Cory initially refuses to attend because of his painful relationship with his father, but he eventually decides to go, showing that he has begun to understand and come to terms with Troy's complicated legacy.



Madeline Appiah, Everal A Walsh, Ray Fearon
Credit: Tyler Fayose

CREATING THE PRODUCTION

IN CONVERSATION WITH... DANIEL BAILEY, DIRECTOR

When working with actors, what are your starting points for supporting character development and building relationships that transition onto the stage?

The starting point is always about how we build the world and having a shared agreement about what the world is. So there's facts and there's questions, which is a tried and tested method and something I use all the time. The facts allow us to build upon the foundation and the questions allow us to make educated assumptions, or what I might call 'safe assumptions', about these characters and their lives.

So, for instance, it's a fact that Troy went to prison. It's an assumption that he shared a prison cell with Bono. We know that they were in prison at the same time, but it's an assumption, it's not a fact, that they shared the same prison cell. But that might help with how close they are

or how intimate they might be if they shared a cell together. Those are safe assumptions, but based on the fact that we know they were both in prison together.

And then I might make things that I call super assumptions. The super assumption is that they did share a cell together, and if they did share a cell, then they might not be afraid to pat each other on the back, or get closer to each other, because they've spent numerous amounts of years in the same cell together. So those are my building blocks, and how I start with character and building the world.

There are other things and exercises that I do, like a version of an informal hot seating that gives everybody a bit of a basis of what they're thinking about their character, so I might sit with Josh Tedeku who is playing Cory, and ask him loads of questions about his life,

and do it in amongst everyone else so they also know what he's thinking. There might be certain memories of his life that he wants to implement, and the whole of the cast are also aware of that, so that helps with some of their own relationships building and the bonds that they might form.

I'll also ask them twenty questions regarding their characters, because there are things that they will have, or they will understand, that aren't in the script, and that helps give us a fuller picture and a more fleshed-out idea about who these characters are.

You talk about the importance of family dynamics within this play. How will you bring these out?

Troy's adultery creates a threat to the harmony and to the peace and synchronisation that this family has, and understanding these stakes is important to building the foundation of the plot.

It's also about understanding the familiarity that these characters possess – there's a reason that that word familiar starts with the word fam – understanding again where those links exist between these characters, things that they've gone through, and having a bit of a shared timeline and a shared understanding and language.

So, this shared language might be a physical touch, it might be something that they do where they finish each other's lines off because they know each other very well, it might be a moment of a character just moving into a certain space or shift in a certain space because they can anticipate what the other person is going to do.

Those, for me, are like coded things that we all know when we have siblings or family members or people, we're very close to. There are things that feel very familial that we try to bring out in our stage version, and I'll be doing a lot to work on that physicality for our version of *Fences*.

One of the themes within the play is masculinity. How will you explore this, and how are you refocusing the lens to allow female voices to have more prominence?

It's a loaded question, but a very good question.

I think that a lot of masculinity is about sometimes the lack of femininity, and so we're going to work super hard on understanding what femininity is

for those characters, particularly our characters that would be seen as maybe the alpha male.

But also, for us to refocus and for us to give voice to our female characters, which there are only really two of, and that's Rose and Raynell. Raynell is the catharsis of the play – she breaks the mould, she breaks the cycle, this familiar cycle that keeps happening. She has a different idea of her dad compared to her siblings and her new adopted mum (Rose).

And the other thing is giving more voice to Rose. Rose speaks about singing, and I think that's also a metaphor for her, that she – despite not maybe having all of the dialogue or majority of the dialogue – she is able to sing in our version of *Fences*. And that singing will communicate something slightly different, which is again of the feminine.

I think the feminine voice doesn't just exist in Rose, it will also exist in characters like Lyons and Gabe, and that's something for us to explore and open up more.

I'm hoping that will help us reframe what masculinity is and what masculinity was, because it's important for us to understand what it was, so that we can understand how far we've come and how far we still need to go.

How influenced are you by previous productions of *Fences*?

I was lucky enough to see a version in London in 2013, that starred Sir Lenny Henry and also Tanya Moodie. It was a phenomenal production, but I'm hoping that we've all done justice and honour to August's words, and to make sure that we represent it in the best way possible.

I think even with Denzel's version (Denzel Washington) that I've seen on screen, I think he took a particular route because of what screen offers.

The theatricality that we want to bring should feel different to what we've seen before. It should feel like an almost reimagining of this play but with all the same dialogue, and all the same dynamics, and all the same stakes, with added theatrical language that might open up different conversations for audiences in 2026 and beyond.

I'm hoping that we get to create a new legacy of what *Fences* is and what *Fences* means.

Can you describe how you are collaborating with the other creatives on this production? Music is very important to you - how are you working with music in this production?

All of the designers I collaborate with, including our stage management, have contributed to what you're going to see on stage, and music has a very integral part because I think each of these characters have some sort of musical ability. They all have a version of a song and they don't have to be the greatest of singers, it's just about the musicality that exists in them as people.

I think everybody has their own musicality, whether it be their cadence of voice, whether it be the imagination and thoughts, whether it be in how they move and how they talk and how they walk. I think everybody has music in them and I want to bring that to the forefront

of our production, because I think that their music will speak subtext, and their music will give more context to these people.

A lot of Troy's gripes are about the brilliance that he had and was never able to express because of the colour of his skin and where America was at that time. I think that, added with each of these characters' creativity, also tells this story about the brilliance of these people, and not being able to fully express it or fully explore their own potential because of where they were in the world and what was happening in the world.

I think the musical aspect of the play will facilitate a lot of story and facilitate a lot of the subtext of the play, and I think it will add another dimension to each of these characters and how we feel for them when we hear them in a different way.



Everal A Walsh, Michael Ahomk-Lindsay, Ray Fearon
Credit: Tyler Fayose

IN CONVERSATION WITH...

LILY ARNOLD, SET AND COSTUME DESIGNER

There's a very distinctive look and feel to your set design. How did you start your research process for the set and costumes?

I start by reading the play, and then do research into the context, in other words what was happening in that particular time and place, to give myself a grounding in what the world was like.

That's scratching the surface, but it just helps to land it in its place and time. You might decide, then, to completely shift and then the design becomes something much more abstract and not recognisable – in this case of Pittsburgh – in the late 50s.

For me it feels like it's a duty of a designer to gain that knowledge. That's part of the joy of this job. With every job you get opportunities to learn about something new.

It's the same with costumes and researching pictures of people at the time. There's an amazing photographer called Charles "Teenie" Harris, who was taking pictures in 1950s Pittsburgh, in the Hill District of the Black community, and finding a resource like that is just amazing because it's sort of immediate and authentic in the first hand.

The house, fence and tree are both literal and realistic, as well as symbolic. Can you explain how they physically work on stage?

The house is on a revolve, so the base of the house, the ground floor is built into a revolving centre, and so that the whole platform is able to move 360 degrees.

On top of that is built the structure of the house, in a realistic 1:1 scale, but it's only a section of the house, along with the back wall and part of the inside of the house that revolves (see photos below of the design).

It's kind of abstract because whilst the house is revolving onstage is a world which is static: a tree, pieces that exist in the backyard of the house, the wooden sawhorses and obviously the fences and various bits of furniture.

The house revolving is inherently symbolic because the whole set doesn't revolve, it's just the house, and in that way, we're suggesting that the house isn't literally revolving. It's symbolically, metaphorically revolving in response to an emotional beat in the story rather than a literal shift.

The theme of cycles is very prevalent in the story. How have you explored this through the set design?

The theme of cycles is very prevalent in the story as a whole, but also in each different character's journeys that they go on and not wanting to be trapped in cycles.

Cory wants to be able to escape what is seemingly the inevitability of becoming like his father. So, there's a sense that they're on this roundabout.

It's about trying to escape that and get beyond a familiar experience – whether literally beyond the fences into the public space, or sort of an emotional, psychological escape.

The production is set in the past. How are you keeping it rooted in the historical time period through the set and costume?

It's important for me to try and understand as much as possible about the environment the characters are living in: what drives these characters, the space they can take up in the world they live in, the community they're a part of, how they are shaped by what's around them.

I want to get a sense of the visual feel of that community, in this case it's Pittsburgh in the late 50s, specifically the Hill District, which was a community, as the name suggests, built on the hillside.

It's not necessarily doing a complete like-for-like with choices I make, but thinking about what was the reality and how can we present that reality in a way that kind of turns the volume up on it, or allows the audience to look at it from a slightly different perspective. It's about focusing the gaze onto the parts of that

time or place that we are interested in or that we think can enhance the storytelling.

This is a touring production that needs to work across a variety of spaces. How can you ensure that it is impactful at every venue, and what are the challenges?

It's often difficult to design a touring production, but on this tour, the venues are all fairly similar in terms of the proscenium arch widths and the depths of the theatres (although HOME Manchester and Lyric Hammersmith are quite a bit shallower).

When I'm first thinking about the scale of the set, I create one master drawing document which has the ground plans from all the venues on it. As I'm thinking about what the component parts of the set are and how big they are, I can map them against each of the ground plans.

As I'm developing the design, I'm also making sure that it's continuing to fit in the space of each venue. I try to keep the set within a footprint that fits exactly the same into all the venues, so there doesn't have to be changes to the shape of the floor, or anything significantly different that would potentially require changes to actors' blocking, or changes to positions of lighting.

It's being kept as the same footprint, which doesn't always happen. There are some tours where the venues are so radically different that you have to design alternatives for different spaces, but with this one we've managed to keep it the same across all venues, which is really helpful.

And with *Fences*, because the house is centred and it's about two thirds of the way upstage, I worked everything around that in order to make sure that the downstage space in front of the house is a spot where everyone can see, which is where most of the play will take place.

How do you source the costumes?

It's a mixture really. With this show, because we're trying to be as sustainable as possible, we're using as much as we can from the costume stores of both the Lyric Hammersmith and Leeds Playhouse.

I visit the stores knowing what the colour palette is and what fabrics and shapes I'm looking for, also knowing that I might have to shapeshift a little bit because there's likely to be items that are close but not exactly what you have in your head.

So, can we alter? Can we add a different trim that gives it a different colour? Can we change the neckline? Can we make the skirt shorter or longer? Can we add some pleating? Can we change the buttons? All of those details help to move the clothing into the direction that you had in mind and often you can be really surprised and find things that you hadn't thought of.

It's always exciting to find some original period pieces from the era, which is possible with the 1950s, especially with cotton items (which are traditionally longer lasting).

Cory's football kit, for example, like the helmet and the padding that he wears, will be original pieces from that era.



KHALIL MADOVI, COMPOSER AND SOUND DESIGNER,

on the rhythm and music of the show

What's really unique about Daniel's take on this version of *Fences* is that he's interested in how August Wilson's script embeds every characters' type of relationship with music. Each has their own cosmic musicalities, instrumentally or vocally. The musical thread becomes the heart of the play – it's an exciting opportunity to use music to convey the play's broader themes.

During the 50s and 60s, Jazz and its many different forms were prevalent. So, we're using Jazz – and its Blues origins – to shape the story we tell on stage. These characters would have grown up surrounded by jazz music, both in wider society and passed down from parent to child in the family home. It's a very rich tapestry for us to pull from for the spirit and emotions of these characters and this story. Jazz is complex, beautiful, and joyful – much like *Fences* as a play – so Daniel wants to play with that as much as possible.

Music was deeply important to Black culture in the 50s and 60s. August Wilson has woven it into the fabric of family identity finely, which we do not take for granted. Having music at the forefront of this production, creatively, is very exciting for us.

Looking at the characters, we can infer their musicality from the text, and we've expanded on that creatively. In the text, Troy sings a song passed down from his father, Rose sings, Lyons is an instrumentalist, and Gabe plays the trumpet in a unique way. Based on how musical families operate, we can then make the creative decision that Cory also had musical ability. And if we know that Lyons is a highly proficient Jazz musician, then perhaps he played several instruments, as many did in that era. I myself began with piano and went on to play the saxophone. Musicians tend to begin with the most accessible instrument,

then move onto specialised music. It's also likely, then, that the piano was the musical centrepiece of the house, given its accessibility.

In terms of my process, I try to keep the initial references consistent – I'm a visual person, and I love moodboards. A visual reference gives me a sense of the world I'm composing for. I also enjoy working from playlists – I always ask the director to build me a playlist of songs that they feel relates to their creative vision. I also have my own instinctual vision for the sound. I map out the biggest moments of the show – these



Michael Ahomka-Lindsay Credit: Tyler Fayose

are bigger checkpoints that inform the final details of what a musical world may be. After that, I can chip away at the finer details – atmospherically or environmentally naturalistic sonic moments, which shapes the feeling more closely.

I have a repeating motif, or melody, or idea, that runs throughout my sound design which I call a golden thread. This must relate to every moment of the play, regardless of chronology, character, or arc. It ties together the sound and music world for the audience. In *Fences*, there is a spiritual aspect to the show that I am tying together with the natural passing of time in the show. Keeping the sound design cohesive

with this golden thread of spirituality can tie disparate elements together to ensure the show has range. This is the final part of my process – once that emerges, I get very excited.

During the tech process, you're figuring out what a story needs in order to take its best form. With a classic, you want to honour the production's vision as well as the story itself. Depending on the director's take, tech rehearsals can be quite significant for sound. With *Fences*, the way the music functions is a key storytelling device. During tech, we will refine and shape day by day as a wider creative team to sync our visions for the stage.

Find out more about the lighting design

with Jai Morjaria, Lighting Designer

Designing a show as iconic as *Fences* is a thrilling challenge. It starts with diving deep into the dramaturgy of the piece to understand how the story's language and message translate visually. After thorough script analysis and close conversations with the Director and Set Designer, we begin interrogating the visual journey of the production. The ultimate goal is to make the story as resonant and accessible as possible for the audience.

Unlocking the core message the Director (Daniel) wants to convey is my top priority—getting a real feel for his dramaturgical vision and storytelling style is essential. In our conversations, Daniel was particularly passionate about tapping into both the inherent rhythm and musicality of the text, as well as the visual depth of the performance space. Creating a lighting design that brings those two elements to life was key.

Lily (Set & Costume Designer) is a fantastic collaborator who keeps the dialogue completely open. We both share the belief that lighting shouldn't just sit on top of a set – it should be

fully embedded into the physical environment. As we interrogated the set design together, it helped me visualise the space in my head and offer creative, integrated lighting solutions early in the process.

August Wilson's text is extraordinary at driving the story and its core themes forward. My primary role is to give those words a strong platform so they can be heard and felt exactly as written. The play's themes directly shape the visual flow and the emotional atmosphere created by the light.

For me, it's about anchoring the audience in Troy's emotional state and reflecting how his choices impact everyone around him. Lighting acts as a subtle guide—honing the shifting moods on stage and helping the audience navigate the heavy, complex themes as the story unfolds.

Fences is a thematically powerful play: at its core it's about love, betrayal, heartbreak, and dynamic family shifts. Lighting plays a crucial role in tracking that emotional arc and marking the pivotal turning points in those relationships as they evolve.

Making Theatre at Headlong

Naeem Hayat, Associate Artistic Director

At Headlong we keep a database of classic scripts and a keen eye on the rights for work that excites us. We read a variety of plays, old and new then have lots of conversations all underpinned by two important questions. Does this play have something urgent to ask? And why should we do this play now? If we are still excited about the play once we have thrown these questions at it then we start to have conversations about making that exciting idea a reality.

We are an unusual company in that we aren't so much concerned with speaking to the zeitgeist, but rather asking what we would do with this 'classic play' if it landed on our desks today as a new play? What is the Headlong lens on this play? - and in turn how might it make us see each other differently. We need to identify what the play is in conversation with today, and how we might best draw that out of it for a contemporary audience through text, performance and scenography.

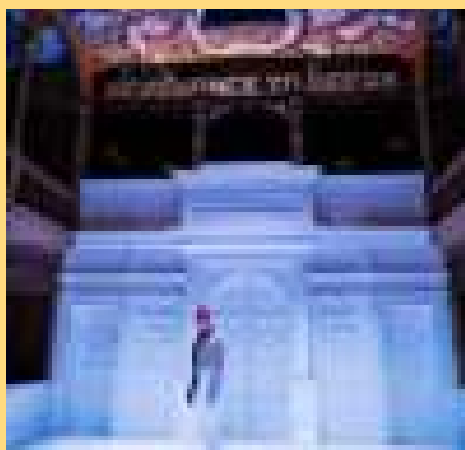
We always aim to reach the most diverse range of audiences. We believe theatre has the power to bring communities together so we think very actively about how we can reach the most under-represented communities, younger audiences and first-time theatre

goers. We build projects and creative teams to deliver the highest quality theatre to the widest variety of people.

Our mission is to make thrilling theatre that has the power to move people and the plays we produce need to be speaking directly to the time we are living in today. Asking urgent questions about the world around us - this is truly exciting to be in direct conversation with the audience and provoke them to view the people and world around them differently.

Fences is the perfect example of a muscular classic play with something urgent and important to say about the past and the present. These are the plays that spark real debate and we hope this production will ignite many conversations about the dynamic between fathers and sons, the nature and cost of love, and its ability to endure through the most difficult situations. For the audiences to ask themselves can we ever truly overcome the struggles that we have lived through? August Wilson wrote an incredibly powerful story that is both inspirational and sometimes tragic. We hope the production sparks the kind of conversations that are as thoughtful, honest and human as Wilson's writing is.

NOTE: Headlong are included as a prescribed practitioner as part of the current AQA A-Level Drama Syllabus.



(Left) *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Credit: Helen Murray), and *A Raisin in the Sun*, credit: Ikin Yum.

EXPLORATION ACTIVITIES

In this section there are a range of activities that you can use to explore this production of *Fences*, either before or after you see the play.

Thinking about key themes of the production is a great starting point and here are some key ones to consider with students to help develop a deeper understanding of the characters and August Wilson's storytelling.

Provocations

- Can the past excuse the way we treat people in the present?
- How much should parents control their children's futures?
- How does racism shape Troy's dreams and expectations for Cory?
- What does it mean to be a "good father"?
- Are Troy's actions understandable, even when they are morally wrong?
- What do the fences in the play symbolise?
- How does the play explore the conflict between dreams and reality?
- Does Rose sacrifice too much for her family?
- Although a period play – set in the 1950s – how does this production reflect issues faced in 2026?

Activity 1: In the rehearsal room

Task: Look at the images below from the rehearsal room and answer the questions:



This is an image of Rose and Troy. Describe how the actors are using physical skills to interact with each other. Consider their body language, gestures, facial expressions and use of proxemics (space between them).

What are the performers communicating to the audience about the relationship between Rose and Troy at this point in the play?

Justify and explain your response.



Look at these two images from the same scene and answer the questions:



- 1) In this scene we see the characters Rose, Troy and their son Cory. Describe the use of facial expressions for each character using precise details and what emotion they are conveying.
- 2) Compare the characters use of space and staging in each image. What is the impact of the characters of Cory and Troy being closer together or further apart?
- 3) In both images describe how the character of Rose is interacting with both Cory and Troy. What can you infer about her relationship with both her son and husband at this point in the play? Make sure to justify and explain your response.

Activity 2 - Marketing the production

Task: Look below at the image used on the production poster:



Discuss and answer the following questions:

1. Consider the image and what information is being communicated about what this production is about in terms of plot, character, tone and style.
2. Why might this image encourage audiences to want to see this production?
3. Once you have seen the production:
 - a. How does this image relate to the Director's vision of the production?

TIP: Read In Conversation with Daniel Bailey on Page 8

- b. What image would you have chosen to market this production to an audience?

Activity 3 - Script Analysis

Task: Read the script extract below from Act 1, Scene 1.

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 some thing 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 an honor to be recruited.

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

Consider the following questions:

1. What performance skills would you use if you were playing the role of Troy when delivering the lines:

"I told that boy about that football stuff. The white man ain't gonna let him get nowhere with that football."

Consider your use of both vocal and physical skills.

2. What performance skills would you use if you were playing the role of Rose when delivering the lines:

"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 an honor to be recruited."

Consider your use of both vocal and physical skills.

3. You are directing this scene. What would you be asking the actors to consider when it comes to the use of space and physical interaction (e.g. eye contact, proximity to each other)

Have a go yourself before looking at the model responses below:

Model response for Question 1:

Playing the role of Troy I would use a loud, firm and serious tone when delivering these lines to show Troy's anger and frustration. I would place emphasis on "told," "white man," and "ain't gonna let him" to show how strongly Troy feels about racism and Cory's future. I would speak with a slower pace and use pauses between the sentences to make his words sound threatening and certain.

Physically, I would stand upright with a tense posture and possibly point towards Rose or use sharp hand gestures when saying "I told that boy." I would maintain strong eye contact with Rose and have a serious facial expression, such as narrowed eyes and a clenched jaw. I could also move closer to Rose slightly to show how passionate and defensive Troy is about his opinion.

I would want to communicate Troy's anger, authority and fear that racism will prevent Cory from achieving his dreams.

Model response for Question 2:

As the director, I would ask the actors to think carefully about their distance from each other and their body language. Troy should stand with a strong, dominant posture and possibly move closer to Rose as he becomes more frustrated, showing his authority and anger. He could use direct eye contact with Rose to make his opinions feel forceful.

Rose could initially keep a comfortable distance from Troy and use relaxed body language. She should maintain eye contact to show that she is confident in what she is saying. As the conversation becomes more tense, Rose could move slightly closer to Troy to show that she is standing up for Cory, rather than backing down.

I would also ask the actors to use pauses and changes in proximity to create tension. Troy could turn away or walk around the stage when frustrated, while Rose could remain still to show that she is calm and confident. This contrast would help the audience understand the power struggle between Troy and Rose.

Activity 4 – Exploration of Music within Fences

Composition No.1: Blue Song Composed by Khalil Madovi

The song, which celebrates the virtues of an old hunting dog called Blue, is a memorialization of the unconditional devotion and obedience of the creature so commonly styled “man’s best friend.” When Cory and Raynell, two of Troy’s three children, sing the song together after Troy’s death, they are not only connecting to one another through a shared childhood memory of their own father, they are also remembering and reifying his value of the characteristics, exhibited through the idealized attributes of Blue, that bolster Troy’s sense of himself as a man.

Task: Listen to this song and consider the following questions:



1. What other characteristics might you choose to describe Troy?
2. What are the emotions or feelings it inspires?

In groups – Create a still image/freeze frame that best represents this feeling. Use as many characters as possible from the play to create this image.

Activity 5 – Design Activity



Task: This is an image of the model that Lily made as part of the set design process. If you were tasked with designing a set for your own production of *Fences* what idea would you come up with?

TIP: Look back at the interviews with Lily on page 11. Think about what she says about research and the process she went through to create this design.

Activity 6 – Live Theatre Review Skills



Being able to write in an evaluative and analytical way about a live theatre performance you have seen is a skill that you can develop. Below is a link to a clip from another version of *Fences* that was performed on Broadway, New York, in 2010 that starred the actor Denzel Washington as Troy.

Task: Watch the clip here and then try to answer the following questions first before looking at the model responses:



1. Describe how the actors use space and staging to interact with each other and what this communicates to the audience about their relationship.
2. Describe how the actor Denzel Washington, playing Troy, uses his vocal and physical skills to portray emotion.

Model response for Question 1:

The actors use the stage to show the changing power between the characters. At the beginning, Troy stands confidently in the centre of the space while Cory keeps some distance from him. This physical separation reflects the emotional distance in their father-son relationship. As the argument becomes more intense, Troy asserts his dominance over Cory by demanding he come over and stand next to him. He physically slaps Cory on the back while telling him to 'straighten up', again highlighting his status.

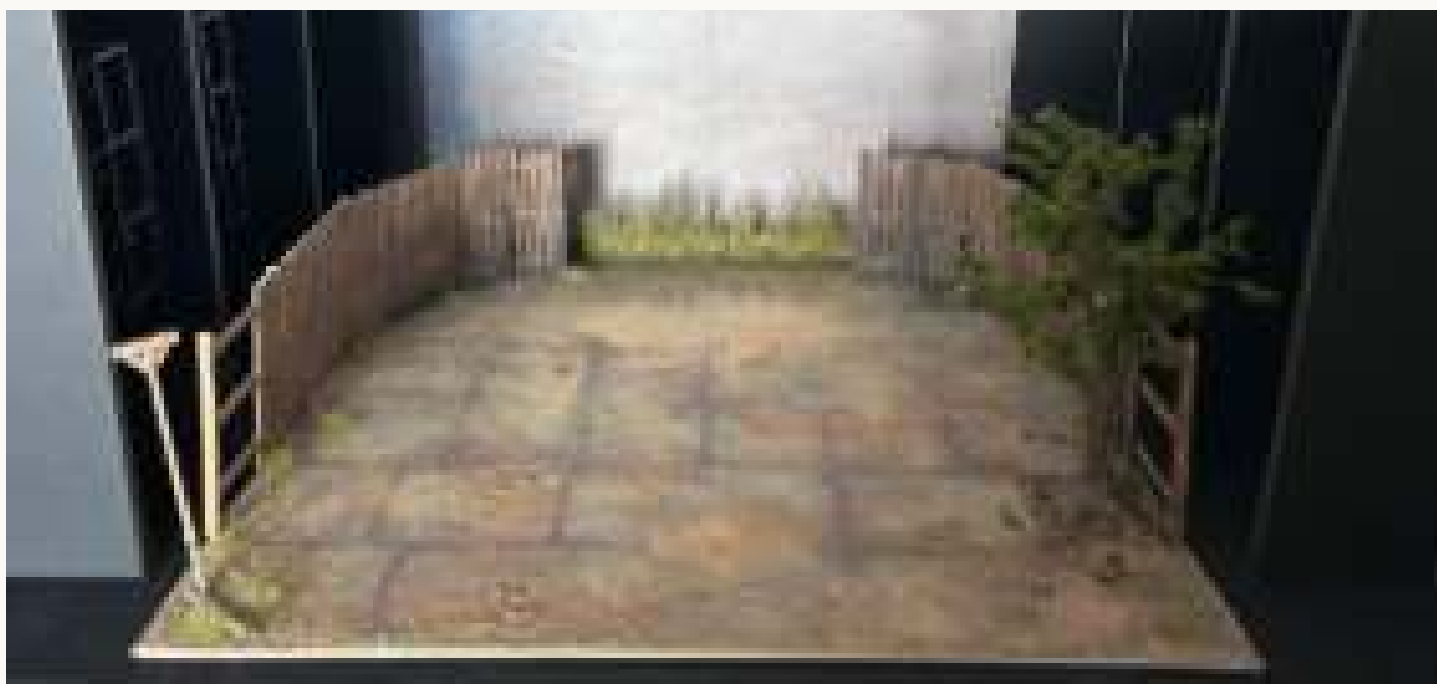
Model response for Question 2:

Denzel Washington uses a powerful, commanding voice to establish Troy's authority. His voice changes in pace and volume throughout the scene. He begins with a controlled, conversational tone but gradually raises his volume, speaking with force and intensity as his emotions build. He emphasises key words, pauses for dramatic effect, and uses sharp changes in pitch to show Troy's frustration, anger and pain.

Physically, Washington stands with a wide, solid stance, making Troy appear confident and difficult to challenge. He uses strong gestures, points aggressively, and leans towards Cory to intimidate him. His facial expressions—such as narrowed eyes, a tense jaw and intense eye contact—show Troy's determination and inner conflict. Even when standing still, his posture remains tense, suggesting that he is constantly holding onto anger and disappointment from his own past. These vocal and physical choices make Troy seem both intimidating and emotionally damaged, helping the audience understand that his harsh behaviour comes from bitterness and regret as well as a need to control his family.

Activity 7 – Devising Theatre

Task: Use the images /stimulus below as stimulus for creating devising a piece of theatre.



Consider the Following Questions:

- What is it?
- Where is it?
- How does it make me feel?
- Does it remind me of anything?
- Is there anything symbolic?
- What characters could be created?

Starting points

- Think about some of the words you associate with the idea of a 'Fence' e.g. protection or barrier. Create some still images to represent some of these words
- Consider how a fence can be symbolic – think about characters or settings.

Stimulus 2: Here is an image of Lily Arnold's set design.



Consider the Following Questions:

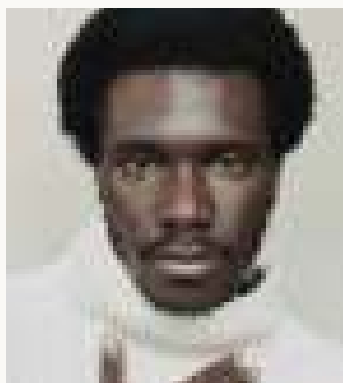
- What type of house is this?
- Where is the house?
- When was the house built?
- How do you feel looking at the house? Is it inviting?

Starting points

- What type of characters might live in a house like this?
- Create some character profiles of possible residents of the house

Acknowledgements

Cast



Lyons
**Michael
Ahomka-Lindsay**



Rose
Madeline Appiah



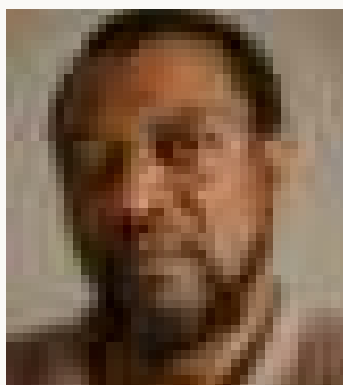
Troy
Ray Fearon



Gabriel
**Simon-Anthony
Rhoden**



Cory
Josh Tedeku



Jim Bono
Everal A Walsh

Creative Team

Writer August Wilson

Director Daniel Bailey

Set & Costume Designer Lily Arnold

Composer & Sound Designer Khalil Madovi

Lighting Designer Jai Morjaria

Movement Director Shelley Maxwell

Fight Director Kev McCurdy

Voice & Dialect Coach Aundrea Fudge

Costume Supervisor Claire Powell

Wigs, Hair & Make-Up Supervisor
Dominique Hamilton

Associate Director Amber Ruby

Design Associate Emily King

Casting Director Heather Basten CDG

August Wilson's *Fences* is presented by arrangement with Concord Theatricals Ltd. on behalf of Samuel French Ltd.

concordtheatricals.co.uk

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ABOUT HEADLONG

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We make theatre with the power to move.

Big, exhilarating productions that use the unexpected to connect everyone we reach, right across the nation.



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The Lyric Hammersmith Theatre produces bold and relevant world-class theatre from the heart of Hammersmith, the theatre's home for more than 130 years. Under the leadership of Artistic Director Rachel O'Riordan and Executive Director Amy Belson, it is committed to being vital to, and representative of, the local community. A major force in London and UK theatre, the Lyric produces adventurous and acclaimed theatrical work that tells the stories that matter.

ABOUT LEEDS PLAYHOUSE

Leeds Playhouse has been one of the UK's leading producing theatres for more than 50 years. As an award-winning theatre and a cultural hub, we are a place where people gather to tell and share stories and engage in world-class performances. As an organisation and a charity that is built by and for the people of Leeds, our house is – and will always be – your house. So please join us as we share our stories, and our warm and welcoming theatre with you.

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ABOUT NOTTINGHAM PLAYHOUSE

Awarded UK's Most Welcoming Theatre in 2023 by the UK Theatre Awards, Nottingham Playhouse is one of the country's leading producing theatres and creates a range of productions throughout the year, from timeless classics to innovative family shows and adventurous new commissions.

We want our theatre to be a space where everyone feels they belong, and we use our stage to tell diverse stories that reflect our city. Our wide reaching participation programmes create life-changing experiences for our community and we also support the next generation of theatre makers in the East Midlands through our extensive Amplify programme.

ABOUT OXFORD PLAYHOUSE

Oxford Playhouse is one of the country's leading regional theatres and the only not-for-profit mid-scale venue in Oxfordshire. The theatre is at the heart of cultural life in the city and region, with a wonderfully rich heritage of live performance, drama, dance, music and comedy. It also produces mid-scale and studio productions, including a hugely popular pantomime which plays to audiences of over 40,000 each year.

As well as being a home for inspirational performance, The Playhouse is an active charity with artistic, social and educational aims. Through its Open House programme, a dynamic and wide-ranging outreach project, The Playhouse opens access for theatregoing and creative learning opportunities for thousands of people every year.