



**FIRST-RATE REVIVAL OF 'FENCES':** (left to right) Viola Davis, Chris Chalk, Denzel Washington, Mykelti Williamson in *Fences*. Photo: Joan Marcus

## *Fences*

By August Wilson

Directed by Kenny Leon

Cort Theatre

138 West 48th Street

(212-239-6200), [www.FencesOnBroadway.com](http://www.FencesOnBroadway.com)

## *Theater Review*

# Stellar performances of Davis & Washington in revival of August Wilson's *Fences* end season on a high note

By David NouNou

To review a revival of any genre is a tricky matter, especially if one has seen the original production. It is even harder if the play was good to begin with. One has to ask oneself: What was it about that production that made it so memorable? Was it the play itself, the acting, the direction, the production value, or any combination of things? Was it really that great in the first place, or is our memory playing tricks on us? And to that end, August Wilson's *Fences* is no exception.

It is never fair to compare performances or productions. Each one has to stand on its own merit, and one has to be as impartial and objective as possible. Denzel Washington portrays Troy Maxson, the role originated by James Earl Jones in the 1987 original Broadway production, and gives a fresh interpretation of the character. Mr. Washington is a superstar and a two-time Oscar winner. He is Hollywood royalty, and has earned his place in this highly coveted inner sanctum. He is the primary reason why the audience pays top dollar to see this show, and his previous New York stage outing was in the 2005 misguided production of *Julius Caesar*. However, he is in the unenviable position of following Mr. Jones' venerable performance, something that is ensconced in Broadway legend. Mr. Jones, with his large frame and his memorable voice, filled the stage as a superman figure and everyone else seemed microscopic in comparison. Mr. Washington gives life to his character, Troy, in a more everyman level and, thus, imbues his performance with a more urgent sense of vulnerability. Mr. Washington shows the flaws in the character early on in the play.

The time is 1957, Pittsburgh, in the backyard of Troy Maxson's house, in which he lives with his wife Rose (the incandescent Viola Davis) of nearly 18 years, and his second son with Rose, Cory (Chris Chalk). Life has been rocky for Troy, and things haven't worked out the way he hoped they would. Among other things, he lives in denial and disillusionment. He has convinced himself that, when he was younger, he was a great baseball player and could have been the proverbial "contender" but the system would not allow an African-American man on the team, and he has since been working as a sanitation worker instead for most of his life. It is a job he resents, but he must support his family. Above all, he has the moral sense of duty that he has to put a roof over their heads, feed them, and clothe them. He never strays from that obligation. However, he, like everyman, has many flaws: Most notably, a roving eye for

other women. He is aware that he has the perfect woman for a wife, who has not only taken great care of him and their son, but has also looked after his firstborn son, Lyons (Russell Hornsby), from a previous marriage, and his harmless but mentally challenged brother, Gabriel (Mykelti Williamson), and has an open heart for Troy's best friend, Bono (Stephen McKinley Henderson).

Besides disillusionment and denial, life throws Troy another curve ball: His roving eye and the need to feel alive again in the arms of another woman, and the consequences that befall him from his actions. It is in act two in which August Wilson has written two of his best scenes. The first being a touching scene where Bono gives Troy cautionary advice about his infidelity. Mr. Henderson infuses such heartfelt sincerity and sensitivity to it, it leaves one gasping upon his exit. The second comes immediately afterward, when Troy confronts his wife, Rose, about his infidelity. I mentioned earlier the amazing Viola Davis. Just watch her reaction and meltdown upon hearing this news. Miss Davis shows us what ultimate betrayal really looks like, and asks her soul-searching question of "When is it my turn to feel alive again"? Every nerve is raw and exposed. All the years that she invested in this family, sacrificed and suppressed her own feelings for, are registered magnificently. She may be down, but never defeated. This explosive performance by Viola Davis is the stuff of theater legend.

Unfortunately, nothing can top this scene. What follows next makes everything else in the play seem melodramatic. However, there is a lot to be commended in this revival. Kenny Leon has taken great efforts in directing this cast. He has made it more of an ensemble piece, where every actor shines, and not just the lead. A special mention has to be given to the great set designer, Santo Loquasto. He has again created a perfect set that evokes the time, place, and the stifling conditions for African-Americans in 1950s Pittsburgh. Mr. Washington has indeed left an impression on us with his interpretation of the downfall of Troy Maxson, a life unfulfilled. However, the indelible performance this time belongs to Viola Davis. I am glad to say that the 2009-2010 theater season closes on a high note with this radiant, richly textured, and superbly acted revival of *Fences*.

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FINE 'FENCES' REVIVAL: Viola Davis & Denzel Washington in *Fences*.

Photo: Joan Marcus



## FENCES

There is a lot to look forward to in this top-notch revival of August Wilson's *Fences*. First and foremost, the return of Denzel Washington to the Broadway stage to play the part of Troy Maxson, a role that was originated and immortalized by the great James Earl Jones, who made it virtually impossible for any actor to follow. Yet Mr. Washington has found a way. He has humanized him as an everyday man instead of the superman created by Mr. Jones. He shows every flaw, disillusionment, and unfulfilled dream that constitutes a man's life. Whatever curveball life has thrown him, Troy believes it is his duty in providing for his wife and family at the expense of being in a job he resents.

However, the indelible performance in this revival is by Viola Davis as his put-upon wife, Rose. After being married for nearly 18 years and tending to her husband's and family's needs, Rose is confronted by the ultimate betrayal: her husband's infidelity. Watching Ms. Davis having to face her husband and hearing about his needs is a meltdown of epic proportions. Seldom does one see such feelings invested in a part. She exposes every raw nerve, and there is not one false note in this performance. It is a role of a lifetime for Ms. Davis, and she has made it the stuff of theater legend. Kenny Leon's deft direction has

turned this show into an ensemble piece, eliciting great performances from everyone in the cast. Stephen McKinley Henderson should also be lauded. As Bono, Troy's best friend and co-worker, Mr. Henderson delivers a beautiful and touching performance. The 2009/2010 theater season closes on a high note with this revival of *Fences*.

CORT THEATRE, 138 West 48th Street, (212-307-4100).

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