

August Wilson's *Fences*—an African-American family in mid-20th century Pittsburgh

Fred Mazelis
14 January 2017

Directed by Denzel Washington; written by August Wilson, based on Wilson's play

Fences, the film version of the 1983 play by August Wilson (1945-2005), tells the story of Troy Maxson and his family. Starring and directed by Denzel Washington, the movie is expected to be one of the nominees for Best Picture at this year's Academy Awards, and will undoubtedly receive other nominations as well.

One of the best known of the cycle of 10 plays for which Wilson received two Pulitzer Prizes, *Fences* is the first of those works to be transferred to the screen. Each of the plays is set in a different decade spanning the entire 20th century.

In *Fences*, the time is 1957 and the place is Pittsburgh, one of the centers of the American steel industry during this period. The central character, Troy Maxson (Washington), is a 53-year-old sanitation worker. His immediate family consists of his wife Rose (Viola Davis) and son Cory (Jovan Adepo). Older brother Gabe (Mykelti Williamson), badly injured in the Second World War and brain-damaged as a result, is no longer living with them but is a frequent presence. Also often on the scene is Troy's coworker and closest friend, Jim Bono (Stephen McKinley Henderson). Lyons Maxson (Russell Hornsby), Troy's son from an earlier relationship, a jazz musician, is regularly around, often to ask Troy for financial help.

Troy Maxson is a kind of African-American Everyman, viewed by some as a counterpart or direct response by Wilson to the character of Willy Loman, created by Arthur Miller in his 1949 play *Death of a Salesman*—like *Fences* the winner of a Pulitzer.

Born in 1904, Troy Maxson has known exploitation and racial discrimination his entire life. In the period before the mass civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 60s, racism and discrimination were still part of everyday life, and not only in the Jim Crow South. We learn that Maxson came to Pittsburgh as a teenager, part of the Great Migration of African-Americans from the rural South to the urban North and West that began around 1915.

Later Troy spent time in prison. After his release, he showed promise as a baseball player, but had to give up any hopes for professional ball in the days before the integration of the American major leagues. He is illiterate but outspoken and opinionated. Troy's near-constant stream of observations and angry invective is the axis around which *Fences* revolves. He is bitter about many

things, but his views seem to go no further than the general feeling that the "white man" is the source of his problems.

The pressures and disappointments weighing on Troy generate tensions within the Maxson family. He is devoted to his wife, but there are also strains, which stem in part from financial difficulties. Rose handles the money, something resented by the proud breadwinner. Though loving and patient, Rose also has occasion to remind Troy of how they used the measly \$3,000 payout given to his disabled brother to buy their home, something that no doubt contributes to Troy's feelings of guilt and inadequacy.

Maxson is estranged from both of his sons. He shows contempt for the older son's musical ambitions, and only advances small loans with extreme reluctance. He will not go to hear Lyons performing at a local bar. Younger son Cory is being scouted for a college football scholarship, but Troy is bitterly opposed. He missed the chance to get into baseball himself because by the time the color bar came down he was already in his 40s. Belittling Jackie Robinson, the first black player in the big leagues, Troy maintains that little has changed. His resentment is so strong that he sabotages his son's dreams.

Jim Bono is a firm, friendly and somewhat steadying influence, but he is not often successful in getting Troy to see the consequences of his anger. It is Bono who warns Troy about the dangers of an affair he has begun with a woman he met in a local bar. The story climaxes with the tragic outcome and aftereffects of this affair, followed by the explosive conflict between Troy and Cory.

The film, based on a screenplay written by Wilson himself (apparently with some help from playwright Tony Kushner, listed as a co-producer) before he died 11 years ago, provides an opportunity for a much wider audience to see this portrait of a working class family. The subject matter is itself important and quite rare. It is difficult to come up with many examples of films or contemporary plays dealing with the life of the working class. The tensions and dynamics in *Fences* are not, of course, unique to African-American families. Immigrant workers from Eastern Europe played a major role in the expanding steel industry, for instance, and also faced discrimination in the early decades of the 20th century. Their story, and those of their descendants, is also rarely if ever told.

Denzel Washington has done an effective job in directing

Fences. The difficulties entailed in adapting a work from the theater to the cinema are well known, and the sheer volume of talk in this work does not make it any easier. The end result in the film version of *Fences*, however, is successful. The nearly two-and-a-half-hour film does not become static.

The acting performances make strong contributions. In addition to Washington, the work of Viola Davis as Rose is particularly effective. Davis, who like Washington appeared in the same role in a 2010 revival of the play in New York, evokes the suffering of Troy's wife without exaggeration or melodrama. Davis's controlled but passionate outburst, in which she declares, "What about my life?" is an important moment.

The understated performance of Stephen McKinley Henderson as Bono must especially be noted. Henderson makes his character an individual and admirable human being as well as another kind of "Everyman," the worker who has seen much and learned much about the world. Henderson's acting is all the more powerful when one considers that he must share the screen with the explosive character of Troy, passionately depicted by Washington.

The weaknesses of *Fences* are those of the play itself; they reflect Wilson's aesthetic approach and social outlook.

Naturalism is effective in sketching conditions and characters in some detail. A broader historical context, however, is mostly missing. This leads to weaknesses, since the human interactions can't be fully and truthfully shown apart from the history that produced them. There are moments, particularly in Troy's interactions with his younger son, when the speeches feel staged and the action melodramatic.

There is a narrowness that detracts from the portrait of Troy Maxson and his family. While a screenplay cannot be a history lesson, the present is the product of the past, and the writer has the task of finding ways to show how it lives in the present.

For example, the great 1919 steel strike, with much of the action centered in Pittsburgh, took place around the time that Troy Maxson arrived in the city. The workers were violently attacked by the steel bosses and the police, and defeated after about three and a half months. Tens of thousands of African-Americans, desperate for work, were recruited from the South to come to Pittsburgh and other steel centers as scabs, a factor that helped to drive a wedge between black and white workers, both native-born and immigrant. How this may have affected Troy Maxson is never suggested in *Fences*. In general, the family exists outside of history to a large extent, and that lessens the truth and concreteness of the picture.

Troy and Rose first met and married in the 1930s. Yet there is no reference in *Fences* to the conditions of the time, the New Deal and the mass labor struggles in which many of the earlier racial divisions were fought in order to win industrial union organization. As for the post-WWII period, the year in which *Fences* is set is in the immediate aftermath of the successful Montgomery, Alabama bus boycott. *Fences* begins in 1957 and ends in 1964, but there is no mention of the civil rights struggles, centered in the South but with significant impact in the North as well. It is significant that Troy, despite his bitterness about race relations, asks for and receives a promotion, becoming the first black sanitation truck driver in Pittsburgh. This step, long overdue to put it mildly, is something that speaks to the nature of the time, but its significance

is never drawn out.

August Wilson was an enormous talent, a man who was at times able to create a kind of poetry out of everyday speech and the lives of ordinary working people. His portrayals were one-sided, however. This can in part be traced to the influences on Wilson in his formative years. He came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and looked for political direction to such figures as Marcus Garvey, the leading black nationalist of the 1920s, and the Nation of Islam, with the young Malcolm X, before his break with the Black Muslims, as its most prominent spokesman.

Wilson is speaking, at least in part, through Troy Maxson. It is significant that the dramatic conflict in *Fences* is between Troy as the angry black man standing up to "white society," against those closest to him, who are portrayed as favoring assimilation. In Wilson's depiction, however, assimilation is similar to conciliation to the status quo. The opposite poles of nationalism and assimilation leave out any consideration of the actual unity of the working class across racial lines.

Wilson's narrow nationalism was expressed in a famous public debate that took place exactly 20 years ago in New York City (January 29, 1997) between him and Robert Brustein, the theater critic, playwright and producer. Wilson argued for the need for a separate black theater in America, insisting that what existed was "white theater" and that the lives of African-Americans could not find expression without a separate cultural form. These views anticipate the current promotion of identity politics in the cultural world.

Despite this, Wilson gave us in *Fences* the story of a family whose problems and trials are for the most part universal in character. The issue of class oppression, and how that shapes the difficulties between fathers and sons and husbands and wives, is what gives the movie version of this play its timeliness and its strength.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact