Spotlight on Learning
a Pioneer Theatre Company Classroom Companion

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Approx. running time:
2 hours and 35 minutes, which includes one fifteen-minute intermission.

Student Talk-Back:
There will be a Student Talk-Back directly after the performance.

FENCES
by August Wilson
Jan. 6 - 21, 2017
Directed by Timothy Douglas

Fences, is play in two acts by August Wilson, performed in 1985 and published in 1986. It won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1987. It was the second in Wilson’s cycle of plays depicting African American life in the 20th century and is set in 1957.

Director Notes
by Timothy Douglas

“I say the only thing I can do here is say goodbye”
… from Seven Guitars by August Wilson

My favorite film quote ever is from Postcards from the Edge, in which Meryl Streep’s character says, “I don’t want life to imitate art, I want life to be art.”

Before he evolved into a master playwright, August Wilson was first and foremost a poet, a fact which is clearly heralded in his dramatic writings by way of the seismic and multi-textured speeches rendered through the characters in his American Century Cycle – a play for each decade in the 20th century representing black life in America.

This Pioneer Theatre Company production of Fences is a culmination of my very own personal 2016 August Wilson Festival which comes on the heels of my having just directed Jitney (Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park) and Seven Guitars (Yale Repertory Theatre). And though I have directed nine of the ten plays from Wilson’s opus multiple times, revisiting these three plays reaffirmed for me that there is no bottom to the constant unearthing of deeper meaning contained within them.

Wilson composed dialogue at an operatic scale, and also lived his life just as expansively … something I would come to viscerally understand while directing the world premiere of the final play in the Cycle, Radio Golf, in 2005. Too soon after the premiere of that play, August lost his battle with cancer.

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August Wilson used the work he created and his voice in the theatre to speak to Black experiences, and to advocate for talented Black artists by insisting that artists of color were used to create productions of his work. For example, his 1996 speech “The Ground on Which I Stand” was a call to action for African American artists to form their own theatres and begin their own cultural preservation in order to protest a theatre environment that marginalized the contribution of African American artists. This speech led to many conversations (which the American theatre field continues to have) about the casting and hiring of artists of color for shows. Wilson’s position in this speech was two-fold; that he wanted to provide work for African American theatre artists since they are marginalized in American theatre, and that a natural understanding of the culture was a necessity for his plays – something that an artist outside of the race/culture could not completely understand. Wilson’s dedication to placing the stories of African Americans onstage and using them as the artists to tell these stories has helped launch the careers of numerous directors, actors, designers, dramaturgs, etc. of color in the United States.

Inspired by Ed Bullins’ cycle of plays centering on the 20th century, Wilson wrote his own cycle, mostly set in Pittsburgh, which has been named “The American Century Cycle: a play for each decade in the 20th century about the African-American experience.” There is one piece for each decade in the 20th century:

- 1910s - Joe Turner’s Come and Gone (1988)
- 1930s - The Piano Lesson (1990)
- 1940s - Seven Guitars (1995)
- 1950s - Fences (1987)
- 1960s - Two Trains Running (1991)
- 1980s - King Hedley II (1999)

Fences holds a special place within Wilson’s canon of work. As Wilson describes in an interview with Bonnie Lyons in 1997...
When I and others used to ask him what plans he had once the Cycle was completed, he would often respond with something akin to his “giving up the body.” I’d always assumed he was waxing philosophical in his usual and clever wordsmithing, only to be confronted by the fact that he did indeed complete his life and work in his ultimate poetic way.

It is true that in nine out of the ten plays a black man dies – or is “sacrificed” – as part of the central plot of the story. This is a tragedy on the human scale, to be sure, but an event that metaphorically nods toward the proverbial blood sacrifice deemed essential for deliverance into the next evolutionary leap: a leap mandated to benefit most those left behind. It only recently occurred to me that the only play in which there is no corporeal transition is Radio Golf, and while recently musing on this fact it finally dawned on me … it was August Wilson himself who was the one to make that ultimate sacrifice just after his completion of the Cycle’s finale.

In Seven Guitars one character asks, “I wonder did he know?” and another muses, “I believe every man know something, but most times don’t pay attention to it.”

1961
Testing desegregation practices in the South, the Freedom Rides, sponsored by CORE, encounter overwhelming violence, particularly in Alabama, leading to federal intervention.

Whitney Young is appointed executive director of the National Urban League. He builds a reputation for his behind-the-scenes work to bridge the gap between white political and business leaders and poor blacks.

1962
Basketball player Wilt Chamberlain becomes the first player to score more than 4,000 points in regular-season NBA games.

The U.S. Supreme Court rules that the University of Mississippi must admit its first African American student, James Meredith.

1963
The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., writes “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” to eight clergymen who attacked his role in Birmingham. Widely reprinted, it soon becomes a classic of protest literature.

Sidney Poitier wins the Academy Award as best actor for his performance in Lilies of the Field. In 1967 he would star in two films concerning race relations, Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner and In the Heat of the Night.

The civil rights movement reaches a dramatic climax with a massive march on Washington, D.C., organized chiefly by Bayard Rustin. Among the themes of the march “for jobs and freedom” is a demand for passage of the Civil Rights Act. In Washington an interracial audience of more than 200,000 hears Martin Luther King, Jr., deliver his famous “I Have a Dream” speech.

1964
President Lyndon Baines Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act into law, giving federal law enforcement agencies the power to prevent racial discrimination in employment, voting, and the use of public facilities.

The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., is awarded the Nobel Prize for Peace in Oslo, Norway.

Cassius Clay wins the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship. Shortly thereafter, he announces he has joined the Nation of Islam and taken the name Muhammad Ali.

1965
The Voting Rights Act is passed following the Selma-to-Montgomery March, which garnered the nation’s attention when marchers were beaten mercilessly by state troopers at the Edmund Pettus Bridge.

Timeline compiled with help from the following sources:
http://www.britishtimeline.com/blackhistory/timeline?tocId=9433428&section=252283
http://www.pbs.org/wnet/aaworld/timeline/civil_03.html

Interview with August Wilson

This interview [with Bonnie Lyons] took place in February 1997 in Merchants Cafe in Pioneer Square in downtown Seattle, near August Wilson’s office. Dressed in a white dress shirt and tie coupled with a casual jacket and a cap, Wilson was soft-spoken and somewhat restrained at first. He became more and more animated as he spoke about his passion for black life in America and for his plays. [Excerpt from source]

Q. Elsewhere you’ve talked about writing as a way of effecting social change and said that all your plays are political, but that you try not to make them didactic or polemical. Can you talk a little about how plays can effect social change without being polemical or didactic?

A. I don’t write primarily to effect social change. I believe writing can do that, but that’s not why I write. I work as an artist. However, all art is political in the sense that it serves the politics of someone. Here in America whites have a particular view of blacks, and I think my plays offer them a different and new way to look at black Americans. For instance, in Fences they see a garbageman, a person they really don’t look at, although they may see a garbageman every day. By looking at Troy’s life, white people find out that the content of this black garbageman’s life is very similar to their own, that he is affected by the same things-love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty. Recognizing that these things are as much a part of his life as of theirs can be revolutionary and can affect how they think about and deal with black people in their lives.

Q. How would that same play, Fences, affect a black audience?

A. Blacks see the content of their lives being elevated into art. They don’t always know that is possible, and it’s important to know that.

Q. You’ve talked about how important black music was for your development. Was there any black literature that showed you that black lives can be the subject of great art?

A. Invisible Man. When I was fourteen I discovered the Negro section of the library. I read Invisible Man, Langston Hughes, and all the thirty or forty books in the section, including the sociology. I remember reading a book that talked about the “Negro’s power of hard work” and how much that phrase affected me. At the time I used to cut the lawn for a blind man named Mr. Douglas, who was the father of the Olympic track star. After I read that, I didn’t so much cut his lawn as plow it, to show the Negro power of hard work. Looking back, I see that I had never seen those words together: “Negro power.” Later of course in the sixties that became “black power.” Forty years ago we had few black writers compared to today. There have been forty years of education and many more college graduates. And it’s important to remember that blacks don’t have a long history of writing. We come from an oral tradition. At one point in America it was a crime to teach blacks to read and write. So it’s only in the past 150 years that we’ve been writing in this country.

Q. Elsewhere you’ve said that the primary opposition in your plays is between blacks who deny their African roots and those who don’t. Would you still describe your work that way?
A. Today I would say that the conflict in black America is between the middle class and the so-called underclass, and that conflict goes back to those who deny themselves and those who aren’t willing to. America offers blacks a contract that says, “If you leave all that African stuff over there and adopt the values of the dominant culture, you can participate.” For the most part, black Americans have rejected that sort of con job. Many blacks in the ghettos say, “If I got to give up who I am, if I can’t be like me, then I don’t want it.” The ones who accept go on to become part of the growing black middle class and in some areas even acquire some power and participation in society, but when they finally arrive where they arrive, they are no longer the same people. They are clothed in different manners and ways of life, different thoughts and ideas. They’ve acculturated and adopted white values.

Q. Can you conceive of an authentically black middle-class person? Aren’t you one?

A. I would say that, yes. I went to the home of a black chiropractor whose wife was also a professional in L.A., and I was surprised how black he was, but it’s not common. European immigrants faced a similar situation when they arrived in this country in the early 1900s. Margaret Mead writes about the anxiety to become Americans, giving up their own languages, being ashamed of their Old World parents. But for blacks there is a bigger problem, because even though the recent white immigrants had different ethnicities, they were all Europeans.

Q. When you look at your work as a whole, what patterns do you see?

A. *Fences* is the odd man out because it’s about one individual and everything focuses around him. The others are ensemble plays. I think I need to write another one like *Fences* to balance it out.

Q. Do you think you might write a play with a woman at the center?

A. It’s possible, but it would be a bit more difficult for me. But right now in the play I am working on, the character I call my spectacle character, like Gabriel in *Fences* or Hambone in *Two Trains Running*, is a woman for the first time. And that character is generally a big character, so I’m working on that.

Q. Elsewhere you’ve said that you start writing plays with an idea. Can you talk about what kind of idea? Is it a social or historical idea?

A. Let’s take the play I’m working on now. In it I’m interested in examining family structure, to see if it broke down and when and why that occurred. The play is set in 1985, but it means going back twenty years to see how we got to where we were in 1985. In this play a number of characters have killed other men. Through the characters and events of the play I want to explore the family and to expose the culprit. That’s important.

Q. From your description it sounds like your new play will be about violence as well as the breakdown of the family. Are they related?

A. When I look at the situation of black America in 1985 I want to see where these kids got these guns. I personally think I can trace it all back to Bernard Goetz in his paranoia shooting those four black kids on the subway, two of them in the back. He was seen as heroic. And shortly after that, young blacks were shot in Teaneck, New Jersey, and chased down streets in New York and beaten with baseball bats and shot. I think the black kids said, “Wait a minute, we’re under attack here.” And they went out and got guns. They armed themselves because they were under assault. Now, unfortunately, they are using the guns on each other. But Goetz is where it began.

Q. In the past you’ve said that the situation for blacks in America is worse now than it was forty years ago. Do you still think so?

A. Without question, yes.

Q. What would make it better? Let’s say you had great political power, what would you do?

A. I would make an announcement that slavery is morally reprehensible and will never occur again. The Emancipation Proclamation was a military move, not a moral admission, so this needs to be a policy statement. Then having said that I would tell blacks they are free to participate in American society as Africans, that they don’t have to give up their heritage. We have black doctors, lawyers, hydraulic engineers, artists, and they all work for someone else. None of them work for themselves. Every manhole cover, mailbox, building, or street is owned by white people in virtually every city in America. The only area in black life where I see people participating as Africans is in the area of rap music. They aren’t censored, they say what they want to say, they do what they want to do, they set up their own record companies. Why are all the most influential black scholars at Harvard and not at Howard? We need to make Howard University as desirable a university as Harvard. I also find it interesting that none of the historically black colleges have a black studies program. And at the graduation at black colleges they don’t sing gospel.

Q. How were things better in the forties?

A. We used to have our own black baseball league, for example. Everything was black-owned. On a Sunday black families would go over to the field, and some would sell peanuts or chicken sandwiches and so on. We were more self-sufficient. When blacks were finally allowed to play in the white leagues, the loss for the black community was great. Similarly in the forties black women were not allowed to go downtown and try on dresses in the department stores. So we had our own dress stores in the neighborhood and the doctors and dentists and teachers and business owners all lived in the same neighborhood and we had a thriving community. Then the doctors and dentists started moving out, and the whole community began to fall down. So now we’re in a situation in which the basketball league is 99 percent black, but it’s owned by whites. If all the money made from black sports and black music were in black hands, if it were spent in our neighborhoods, things would be very different.

Q. Elsewhere you’ve said you want your audience to see your characters as Africans, not just black folks in America. Can you talk about that?

A. I’m talking about black Americans having uniquely African ways of participating in the world, of doing things, different ways of socializing. I have no fascination with Africa itself. I’ve never been to Africa and have no desire to go. I’ve been invited several times and turned down the invitations because I don’t like to travel. When my daughter went to college, she called me all excited that she was studying about Timbuktu. I told her, “You study your grandma and her grandmother before you go back to Timbuktu.” People don’t want to do that because soon you wind up with slavery, and that’s a condition people want to run away from. It’s much easier to go back to the glory days of Timbuktu, but to do that is falsely romantic. It doesn’t get you anywhere. I remember when I first went with a friend.
to a Passover seder and heard them say, “When we were slaves in the land of Egypt.” I met a kid in 1987 in New York who thought slavery ended in 1960. This is God’s honest truth. He was seventeen years old and he thought slavery ended in 1960. That’s our fault. Like the Jews, we need to celebrate our emancipation; it would give us a way of identifying and expressing a sense of unity.

Q. Do you see anything anomalous about your wanting blacks to see themselves as Africans but your not having any desire even to visit Africa?

A. I’m simply saying blacks should hold on to what they are. You don’t have to go to Africa to be an African. I live and breathe that. Even in the sixties, with all the romantic involvement with Africa, I never wore a dashiki to participate in the black power movement. Africa is right here in the southern part of the United States, which is our ancestral homeland. I don’t need to make that leap across the ocean. When the first African died on the continent of North America, that was the beginning of my history.

Q. Do you have any particular fondness for one of your characters more than the others?

A. No, but Joe Turner is my favorite play. I like all my characters, and I always say I’d like to put them all in the same play - Troy and Boy Willie and Loomis and Sterling and Floyd. I once wrote this short story called “The Best Blues Singer in the World,” and it went like this: “The streets that Balboa walked was his own private ocean, and Balboa was drowning.” End of story. That says it all. Nothing else to say. Since then, I’ve been rewriting that same story over and over again. All of my plays are rewriting that same story. I’m not sure what it means, other than life is hard.

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Our Equity Cast

TIMOTHY DOUGLAS (Director) returns to PTC after directing Clybourne Park in 2013.

BIKO EISEN-MARTIN* (Lyons) Off-Broadway: Lift (59E59) Film: Poetic License. Education: Brown University, National Theatre Conservatory. Regional Theatre, including All The Way (Cleveland Playhouse); Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead (Folger); Stick Fly, Under The Skin (Arden Theatre Company); The Ashes Under Gaii City (Contemporary American Theatre Festival); The Whipping Man (Syracuse Stage, Actors' Theatre of Louisville, Gulfshore Playhouse); and Lift (Crossroads Theatre Co).

MEG HOGULUND (Raynell) is seven-years-old and in her PTC debut. Meg loves singing, dancing and gymnastics. She can eat more oysters than her dad and tells better jokes than her mom. She and her family are part of the Community V(i)llage. She loves her grandparents and dedicates her performances to her teachers Julie, Natalie, Melanie, Cindy, April and Katie.

JIMMIE “J.J.” JETER* (Cory) A Winston-Salem, N.C. native, Jeter is a 2016 graduate of The Juilliard School in New York. His recent theatrical credits include: Broadway: My Letter to Broadway (Ensemble), Regional: Romeo and Juliet (Benvolio) at Shakespeare Theatre Company (Washington D.C.)

JEFFERSON A. RUSSELL* (Gabriel) makes his PTC debut with Fences after having recently appeared as Shealy in Jitney at Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park. Regional credits include shows at Round House Theatre, Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company, Dallas Theatre Center/The Goodman; Rep Stage, Hangar Theatre, Folger Theatre, Everyman Theatre, as well as Kennedy Center National Tours, O’Neill Theatre Center, Ford’s Theatre, Shakespeare Company and Gulfshore Playhouse.

GAYLE SAMUELS* (Rose) received a best actress nomination from the Connecticut Critics Circle for her portrayal of Billie Holiday in Lady Day at Emerson’s Bar & Grill. Broadway: Sunset Boulevard, Grind, Dancin’, Dreamgirls. TV/Film: Bull, Madame Secretary, The Americans, Twenty Good Years, The Class, Black Nativity, The Tides That Bind, HoneyBee.

JEORGE BENNETT WATSON® (Bono) makes his Pioneer Theatre Company debut. Watson was most recently seen in Fences at Triad Stages in Greensboro, N.C., playing Troy Maxson, and in Lifetime Movie Network’s upcoming untitled affair project as Det. John Ahern. Television and film credits include NBC’s Homicide: Life in the Streets, HBO’s The Wire, FX’s Justified, Showtime’s Shameless; CBS’s Cold Case and Red Wall Productions’ upcoming film Saving Father.

MICHAEL ANTHONY WILLIAMS* (Troy) debuts at Pioneer Theatre Company. Off-Broadway credits: Persephone at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Regional credits include Jitney and Of Mice and Men at Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park; Jitney and To Kill A Mockingbird at Ford’s Theater; King Hedley II at Arena Stage; Unexplored Interior at Mosaic Theater Company; Starving at Woolly Mammoth Theatre; Jesus Hopped the “A” Train and Two Trains Running at Round House Theatre; Venus and Omniaum Gatherum at Olney Theatre Center. Film credits: Losing Isaiah, The Replacements, Contact, Unbreakable and The Brave One.

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The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at Pioneer Theatre Company. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Pioneer Theatre stage. Spotlight on Learning is published by Pioneer Theatre Company, 300 S. 1400 E. SLC, UT 84112. Copyright © 2015, Pioneer Theatre Company. Please feel free to download and print Spotlight on Learning, as long as you do not remove any identifying mark of Pioneer Theatre Company.

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Our Equity Cast