

Fences

August Wilson was one of America's most prominent playwrights, producing his cycle of ten plays, all depicting working class African-Americans in his home town of Pittsburgh, each play taking place during a different decade. Perhaps because the plays were seen as too talky, too full of monologues rather than action, they have not been adapted into films. But Wilson himself did write one screenplay for his most successful work, the 1983 drama "Fences," which won him the Pulitzer Prize for drama. After Wilson's death in 2005, "Fences" got a worthy reprise in a 2010 Broadway production wherein the leads, Denzel Washington and Viola Davis, both earned Tony awards. The two actors now star in the long-awaited film version of "Fences," and let it be known that they wholly inhabit their roles.

Denzel Washington not only plays Troy Maxson, the protagonist of "Fences," but he also directs and displays a fine hand for the material. It's the 1950's in Pittsburgh's black enclave where Troy is a one-time Negro League baseball star whose career ended before the breaking of baseball's color barrier. He is now employed as a trash man with his buddy from a prison stay, Jim Bono (Stephen Henderson). Pugnacious and ambitious but embittered, he is a voluble force, ever demanding of other people, especially his son Cory (Jovan Adepo), and frustrated by a pedestrian life where once he was a star. Though aiming to appear righteous and principled, Troy eventually reveals a secret that crushes his wife Rose (Davis) and undercuts his personal and parental authority.

Washington—who must by now feel this role in his bones--shines as Maxson, a man claiming to be upright but who cannot conceal his flaws. It is a searing portrait of a black man at mid-century, a figure who had a touch of glory but who could never extend that renown into later life; a thwarted man who thinks he can exert his sense of manhood through sheer will. The role is richer than much of Washington's more conventional work and maybe his most complex performance since he portrayed "Malcolm X" (1992).

Davis, though a more modest character in the drama, rises to match Washington, especially in a heart-breaking scene when she confronts Troy about an affair. Her tearful, uncomprehending challenge to her husband bares her emotions to their core—and ours. Also good is Adepo, a young British actor, as Cory, a skeptical adolescent trying to fend off his tough father's demands. Also very moving is Mykelti Williamson as Gabriel, Troy's childlike brother, mentally damaged from the WWII and barely able to comprehend the life around him. His scenes are poignancy made flesh.

"Fences" is, of course, a filmed play, with most shots in and around the Maxson house, especially the modest backyard where Troy is fitfully building a longed-for fence. Wilson, however, used his screenplay to open up his story, and director Washington adds verisimilitude with scenes shot in Pittsburgh locations, most convincingly coated in a 1950's sheen. But the reason to see "Fences" is the acting, performers at their peak in a landmark American drama.

(This film is rated "PG-13" and runs 138 mins.)

(December)