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## 'Fences' makes graceful leap from stage to screen

Denzel Washington directs film adaptation of story that's already earned him a Tony

Some people build fences to keep people out ... and some people build fences to keep people in."

That's what Jim Bono (Stephen McKinley Henderson) tells Troy Maxson (Denzel Washington), his longtime friend, foil and fellow garbage truck lifter, in "Fences," the film adaptation of August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize-winning play.

In addition to the fence that Troy, the central character is building for his wife Rose (Viola Davis) in the small backyard of their modest Hill District house in Pittsburgh, metaphorical fences — some entrapping, some excluding — permeate this powerful film.

Troy belongs to a damaged-yet-unbroken brand of postwar patriarchy who control their families with rigid concepts of race, duty and manhood. His two sons futilely seek his approval and relief from the barrage of his relentless resentments. A charismatic, naysaying philosopher, Troy builds barricades of words to separate himself from life's disappointments. Now 53 years old, Troy was a

talented baseball player in the Negro Leagues. He never had the opportunity to play in the major leagues and begrudges Jackie Robinson on behalf of better black ballplayers — including himself, he believes — who never went to the Big Show.

A tethered baseball hangs from a tree in the backyard that is the primary setting for the film, and Troy punctuates his preacherly proclamations with swings of his bat.

Troy's bitterness is bottomless, and when his son Cory (Jovan Adepo) joins the high school football team, Troy masks his envy of Cory's athletic potential as paternal protection, forcing his son off the team and refusing to meet with the college recruiter.

Troy is a complex character, both appealing and repellent, bursting with repressed spousal, fraternal and paternal feeling, yet inflicting the deepest of betrayals in each of these categories.

"You got to take the crooked with the straights," Troy is fond of saying, unwittingly describing himself.



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Troy's dogmatic repudiation of hope and trust consumes and exhausts everyone in his orbit. Troy wants to stake out some piece of ground that he can rule on his own terms in peace. And, to the extent he succeeds, his kingdom is founded on the hardships he inflicts on the people closest to him.

Efforts to penetrate his armor fail until Troy, at the end of his own tether, confesses to his wife: "It's not easy to admit that I've just been standing in the same spot for 18 years."

In response, astonished and appalled by his selfishness, Rose responds it has been even harder for her to stand in that same place with him, giving up her own hopes and dreams to plant them in the rocky soil that is Troy Maxson — and it didn't take her 18 years to figure out they weren't going anywhere.

Most plays founder in their journey from the stage to the screen. They're wordy, not visual, more suited to radio. This is not the case with "Fences."

Troy's life is put into pictorial context as he and Bono travel the city. The family members move

from the dark parlor to the sunny kitchen of the house (Rose's domain) as the story dictates. The compact setting of the house and yard, and the closeness of the cinematography enhances our understanding of the characters' interactions. "Fences" is a family drama. Family drama takes place at home.

August Wilson wrote the screenplay several years before his death in 2005. He wanted to give an African-American the opportunity to direct the film, and, at the time of the discussions with Wilson, Spike Lee was unavailable and John Singleton was considered too inexperienced.

Denzel Washington directs this production (his third directing effort) and playwright-screenwriter Tony Kushner ("Angels in America," "Lincoln") was brought on as a co-producer, with Wilson retaining sole writing credit for the screenplay.

Sometimes though, the stars simply align, and the constellation comprised of Washington, Davis and Henderson shines blindingly bright.

All three starred in the 2010 Broadway revival of "Fences," for which Washington and Davis won Tony awards and Henderson a Tony nomination. These actors know everything about each other and their characters before filming, and reunite as a family on screen in the deepest sense.

This exemplary motion picture has the perfect cast, the perfect script and the perfect director to bring to life this ring in Wilson's "Century Cycle" of the African-American experience told through 10 plays, one for each decade of the 20th century.

It was a long-time coming — but hey, you have to take the crooked with the straights.