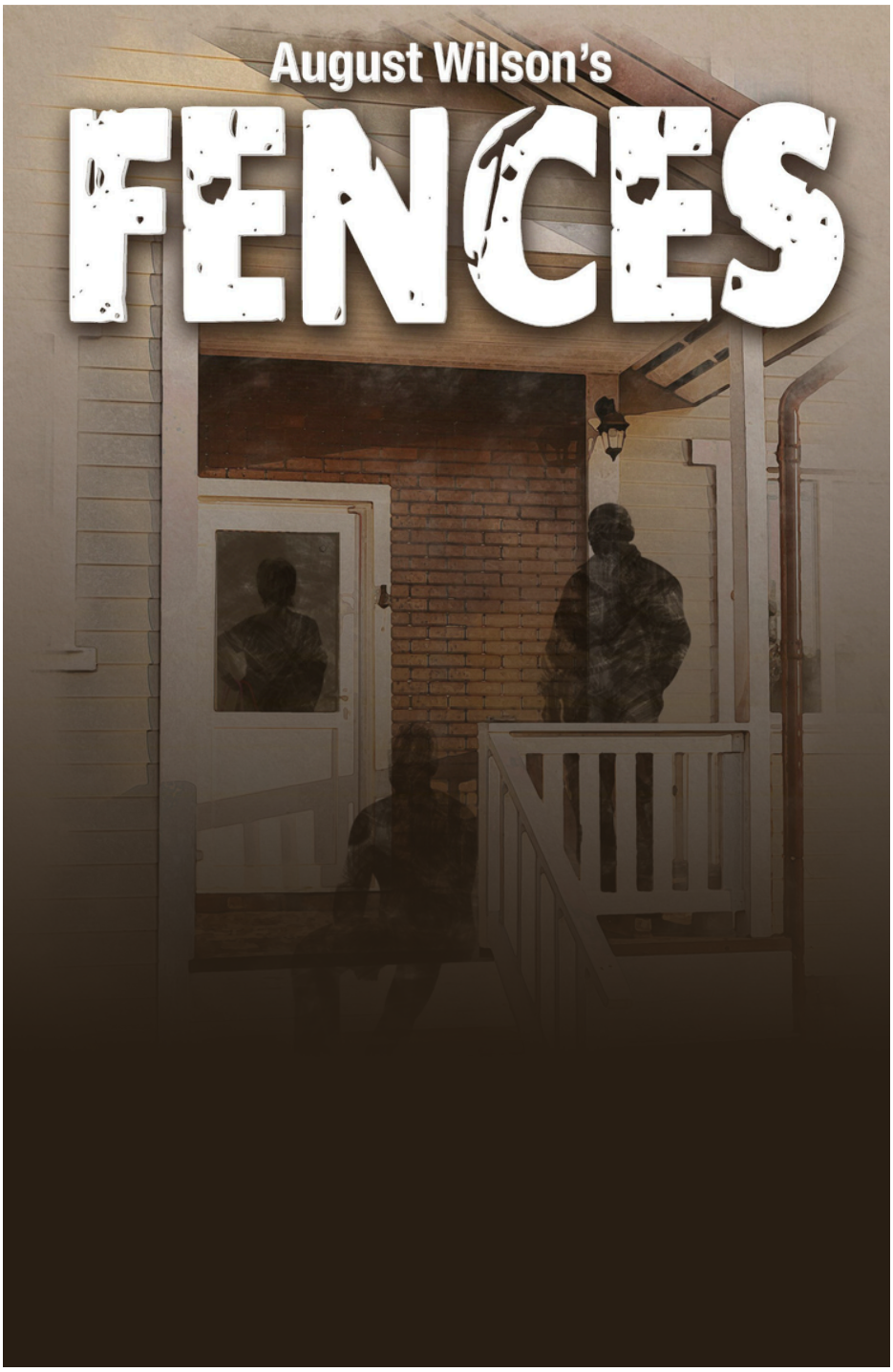
ALABAMA SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

STUDY GUIDE

2026-2027 Season



Content Warning: The play includes racist language and racial slurs, strong language, themes of infidelity, family conflict, physical confrontation, and death. Please preview the text and prepare your students for discussion.

Written by **August Wilson**

Directed by **Addae Moon**

ASF.NET | 334.271.5353

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ALABAMA COURSE OF STUDY: ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS

[ELA21.W.6.1] Write arguments to support claims with clear reasons and relevant evidence.

[ELA22.W.6.2] Write informative or explanatory texts to examine a topic and convey ideas, concepts, and information through the selection, organization, and analysis of relevant content.

[ELA15.RI.6.5] Analyze how a particular sentence, paragraph, chapter, or section fits into the overall structure of a text and contributes to the development of the ideas.

[ELA16.RI.6.6] Determine an author's point of view or purpose in a text and explain how it is conveyed in the text.

[ELA12.RI.9-10.3] Analyze how the author unfolds an analysis or series of ideas or events, including the order in which the points are made, how they are introduced and developed, and the connections that are drawn between them.

[ELA4.RL.11-12.4] Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in the text, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh, engaging, or beautiful. (Include Shakespeare as well as other authors.)

[ELA5.RL.11-12.5] Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text (e.g., the choice of where to begin or end a story, the choice to provide a comedic or tragic resolution) contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact.

ENGLISH LANGUAGE ARTS STANDARDS *cont.*

[ELA7.RL.11-12.7] Analyze multiple interpretations of a story, drama, or poem (e.g., recorded or live production of a play or recorded novel or poetry), evaluating how each version interprets the source text. (Include at least one play by Shakespeare and one play by an American dramatist.)

ALABAMA COURSE OF STUDY: SOCIAL STUDIES STANDARDS

SS.11.11 Analyze how cultural changes, economic growth, and government action during the Truman and Eisenhower administrations shaped Americans' daily lives.

SS.11.10a Identify and explain key events from 1945 to 1955 that helped give rise to a large-scale civil rights movement.

SS.11.10b Analyze how the campaigns and actions of civil rights activists and organizations from 1954 to 1965 prompted federal measures to advance civil and human rights.

NATIONAL CORE ARTS ANCHOR STANDARDS

TH.Re7.1 Perceive and analyze artistic work.
TH.Re8.1 Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.
TH.Re9.1 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.
TH.Cn10.1 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.
TH.Cn11.1 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

WELCOME LETTER TO EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

Dear Educators & Students,

Welcome to our 26-27 season at Alabama Shakespeare Festival! As the State Theatre of Alabama, we take great pride in supporting teachers and students by providing transformative experiences that enhance classroom instruction across Alabama and beyond.

In support of the theatre's mission to engage, entertain, and inspire, Alabama Shakespeare Festival's Education work leverages the power of live theatre to inspire creativity, ignite curiosity, boost confidence, and develop life skills.

This guide invites students to look beyond deciding whether a character is simply right or wrong. Before the performance, explore the characters and historical context. Afterward, use the discussion questions, movement activities, and response sheets to consider how ASF actors and designers bring Wilson's words to life. Students do not need to know every baseball reference to connect with this family.

We hope the performance leaves your students with something to talk about, something to question, and a reason to keep listening to one another.

Learn more about our Education work at: www.asf.net/education.

If you've visited ASF in past seasons, we look forward to having you back. If you're visiting us for the first time, welcome to the theatre! You belong here.

Warmly,
ASF Education Team

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PLOT, CHARACTERS, AND SETTING

PLOT

"Some people build fences to keep people out... other people build fences to keep people in."

The play opens with Gabriel performing a ritual that foreshadows the ending of the play. Troy Maxson and his friend Bono enter the yard for their usual Friday evening routine of "talk and drink" after work. Troy is a sanitation worker and former Negro leagues baseball player. His wife Rose wants a fence built around their yard; his older son Lyons wants respect for his life as a musician; and his teenage son Cory hopes football will open a path to college. Troy works hard to provide for his family, but the opportunities denied to him continue to shape what he believes is possible for his children.

As Troy and Cory disagree about the future, questions about work, loyalty, marriage, and responsibility bring deeper tensions into the yard. Eventually, the father and son come to physical blows. Troy's confidence in his own judgment leaves little room for anyone else's hopes. After a sudden tragedy at the end of the first half of the play, the family must decide what it means to love someone whose actions caused harm and how to carry a shared history without allowing it to determine everything that comes next.

CHARACTERS

Troy Maxson — A charismatic storyteller, husband, and father whose disappointments and decisions shape the entire household.
Rose Maxson — Troy's wife, who has invested in her family while setting aside dreams of her own.
Cory Maxson — Troy and Rose's teenage son, seeking his father's support to play football.
Lyons Maxson — Troy's adult son from an earlier relationship, a musician pursuing his own path.
Jim Bono — Troy's longtime friend and coworker, who is loyal and honest to a fault.
Gabriel Maxson — Troy's brother, a World War II veteran living with a brain injury and a vivid spiritual understanding of his place in the world.
Raynell Maxson — Troy's youngest child.

Additional Character(s): Alberta, Bonnie, Lucille, Coach Zellman, Mr. Stawicki, Mr. Rand, Miss Pearl, and Brownie all play an important role in the plot but do not appear onstage.

SETTING

The Maxson house and yard in Pittsburgh's Hill District. 1957 and 1965.



Content Warning: The play includes racist language and racial slurs, strong language, themes of infidelity, family conflict, physical confrontation, and death. Please preview the text and prepare your students for discussion.

THEMES IN THE PLAY

GRIEF AND LOSS

Throughout the play, grief reaches beyond the death of a loved one. Troy mourns the baseball career he was denied, while Rose confronts the loss of the marriage and shared future she believed she had. Cory must reckon with the relationship he wanted with his father and the one they actually have. These losses shape how the characters love, argue, and protect themselves. The play asks how people can acknowledge what they have lost without allowing that pain to determine the rest of their lives.

PROTECTION AND CONTROL

Troy believes his experience has taught him how a Black man survives. He wants Cory to have steady work and avoid the disappointment he has known. Cory sees an opportunity his father refuses to consider. The conflict asks us to examine when parental authority becomes a restriction and whether protecting someone can become a way of limiting their life.

LOVE AND RESPONSIBILITY

For Troy, providing food and shelter proves his commitment to his family. Rose and Cory need more than material support from him. This asks what a father owes a spouse or child and whether meeting that one responsibility can excuse failing another. Pay attention to the difference between what characters say love means and what they actually do.

GENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Troy carries memories of racial exclusion, violence, and missed chances. Those experiences help explain his fears, but they also shape the authority he claims at home. Wilson invites us to ask how people can acknowledge the injuries of the past while refusing to pass those injuries along to others.

Think about it: Can trying to protect someone you love prevent them from growing? How can you tell when to offer guidance and when to let someone make their own choices? Explain.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Photo: Agust Wilson. c.2005. Boston Globe.

August Wilson (1945-2005) grew up in Pittsburgh's Hill District. The voices, relationships, humor, and struggles of that community became central to his writing. He began as a poet and later helped establish Black Horizons Theatre. His plays place Black working-class lives at the center of American drama.

Wilson wrote a series of ten plays, chronicling Black American life across 100 years of American history. Collectively called the **American Century Cycle**, the series includes ***Fences*** and ***The Piano Lesson***, which both won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

WHY FENCES MATTERS

August Wilson's *Fences* premiered at Yale Repertory Theatre in 1985 and opened on Broadway in 1987, directed by Lloyd Richards. It received the 1987 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play holds a significant place in American drama because it brings the Black working-class experience into the tradition of tragedy while questioning the nation's promise of equal opportunity. Troy Maxson's thwarted baseball ambitions expose the distance between America's ideals of merit and achievement and the racial barriers that determine whose talents receive recognition. The baseball motif reveals how a national symbol of America and possibility can also carry a history of exclusion and dreams denied.

Troy endures as a tragic figure because his struggle for dignity exists alongside his capacity to harm those closest to him. His commanding language and resistance to defeat give him dramatic stature, while his insistence on controlling his household reveals the destructive limits of that resistance. Rose's recognition of how much of herself she has surrendered deepens the play's examination of power, sacrifice, and identity within the family.

Fences has crossed borders and cultures, with productions documented all over the world from London to Johannesburg, Uganda, Ghana, and Beijing, and the play has been translated into several languages, including Mandarin and Italian.

Find out more about the preservation of August Wilson's work at: www.augustwilsonsociety.org

THE AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

The American Century Cycle

August Wilson wrote one play for each decade of the Twentieth century, creating a mosaic of Black American life. Nine of the ten plays are set in Pittsburgh's Hill District (*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* Wilson's breakout hit, is set in Chicago, IL.)

1900s	*Gem of the Ocean*
1910s	*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*
1920s	*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*
1930s	*The Piano Lesson*
1940s	*Seven Guitars*
1950s	***Fences***
1960s	*Two Trains Running*
1970s	*Jitney*
1980s	*King Hedley II*
1990s	*Radio Golf*



Photo: Mary Alice, Ray Aranha, and James Earl Jones in the original Broadway production of *Fences.* c. 1987. William B. Carter

Think about it: A history textbook and a person's lived experience can describe the same decade differently. What might a play reveal about daily life in a particular time period that a timeline or research in a textbook might leave out? Explain.



Photo: Denzel Washington and Viola Davis in film adaptation of *Fences.* c. 2016. Paramount Pictures.

August Wilson's American Century Cycle is still one of the greatest achievements in American theatre, placing the everyday lives of Black Americans at the center of a critical examination of our nation's history, promises, and contradictions. The characters in these plays are complex and undeniably human.

Across the cycle, progress remains uneven. New opportunities emerge while inherited wounds and obligations persist. The plays collectively challenge the idea that history moves steadily toward freedom, asking what each generation must remember, confront, and transform. This is why these works have endured.

ALABAMA SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

PITTSBURG: 1957



Shoe Shine. Wylie Avenue looking west, April 29, 1930. Pittsburgh City Photographer Collection via University of Pittsburgh Collection

The ciy outside the Maxson backyard.

Fences begins in 1957, in a Pittsburgh shaped by industry, migration, neighborhood pride, racial barriers, and rapid redevelopment. For August Wilson, the city was a living archive of voices, history, humor, work, music, and memories.

The View from the Hill

August Wilson was born in the Hill in 1945 and spent his early childhood on Bedford Avenue. By the mid-20th century, the Hill District was a major center of Black cultural life. Jazz clubs, churches, shops, newspapers, restaurants, and front-porch conversations helped create a dense social world that Wilson would later draw on across his plays.

Baseball and the Color Barrier



Photo: Jackie Robinson. Hulton Archive/Getty Images

Jackie Robinson breaks Major League Baseball's color barrier in 1947.

Troy Maxson's memories of baseball come from an era when pittsburgh's Homestead Grays and the Pittsburgh Crawfords were among the great powers of Black baseball. Integration opened many doors, but it arrived too late for Troy's generation.

Work & Opportunity

Who gets to move up?

Troy works on a sanitation crew and challenges a system in which Black employees do the lifting while white workers drive the trucks. The workplace indicident you'll learn about in the play makes a big question visible: Who gets to move up? Who gets access to advancement?

Narratives of "Blight"

Redevelopment of Pittsburgh's Lower Hill began in 1955. **Roughly 100 acres were cleared** for a civic complex and roadway projects, **displacing thousands of Black residents** and hundreds of businesses (mostly white owned). As Troy builds a fence around his home, the city beyond his backyard is literally erasing and redrawing the boundaries of Black neighborhoods.



Photo: The demolition of the Lower Hill District captured Jan. 2, 1957. University of Pittsburgh Collection.

REFERENCES TO KNOW

A&P — A major grocery store chain. References to its prices and hiring practices connect everyday shopping to questions of racial fairness.
Archangel Gabriel — A biblical messenger whose name and traditional imagery inform the character's trumpet and spiritual role.
Buying on credit — Receiving goods immediately and paying later, often in installments with interest. Troy's story about buying furniture uses this practice to explore debt, exploitation, and survival.
Color barrier — A racial boundary that excludes people from an institution or opportunity.
Compensation — Money provided for a loss, injury, or service. Gabriel's military-related compensation matters to the family's finances.
George "Selkirk" — A white New York Yankees outfielder. Troy compares Selkirk's opportunities with those denied to Black players.
Integration — Opening an institution or space previously restricted or separated by race. Formal access does not guarantee equal treatment.
Jackie Robinson — The player who broke modern Major League Baseball's color barrier in 1947. References to Robinson expose differing views about how much opportunities have changed.
Joe Louis — The Black heavyweight boxing champion whose strength and success made him an important cultural figure. Bono compares Cory's physique to Louis's.
Josh Gibson — A celebrated Negro leagues catcher and powerful hitter who never had the opportunity to play Major League Baseball. Troy invokes Gibson to challenge the idea that talent guarantees success.
Judgment Day — Christian references associated with heaven, judgment, and spiritual deliverance.
Legacy — What someone leaves behind, including memories, habits, opportunities, and consequences.
Negro leagues — The historical name for Black professional baseball leagues that developed during segregation, when Black players were excluded from the major leagues. This history shapes Troy's understanding of opportunity.
Saint Peter — A Christian figure traditionally associated with the gates of heaven, an image connected to Gabriel's spiritual world.
Sanitation worker — A person whose duties can include collecting and removing refuse. Troy challenges the racial assignment of jobs at work.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT + PAIRED TEXT

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

1947 | Jackie Robinson makes his Brooklyn Dodgers debut on April 15, breaking the modern major-league color barrier.

1955-1956 | The Montgomery Bus Boycott challenges segregated city buses through sustained community organizing and a legal challenge.

1957 | *Fences* begins. This is the fictional starting point for the Maxson family's story.

1964 | The Civil Rights Act is signed on July 2, prohibiting discrimination in public accommodations and employment, among other provisions.

1965 | The final scene of *Fences* takes place. In the wider world that year, the **Voting Rights Act** is signed. As Cory is heading off to the Marines, troops are being deployed for the **Vietnam War**.

PAIRED TEXT

Before August Wilson became a playwright, he was a poet. That comes through in the rhythm, language, and musicality of *Fences*. Take a moment to reflect on the paired text below and explore how the imagery and phrasing brings similar feelings into focus. **Click on each title to view the full poem.**

Mother to Son

By Langston Hughes

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

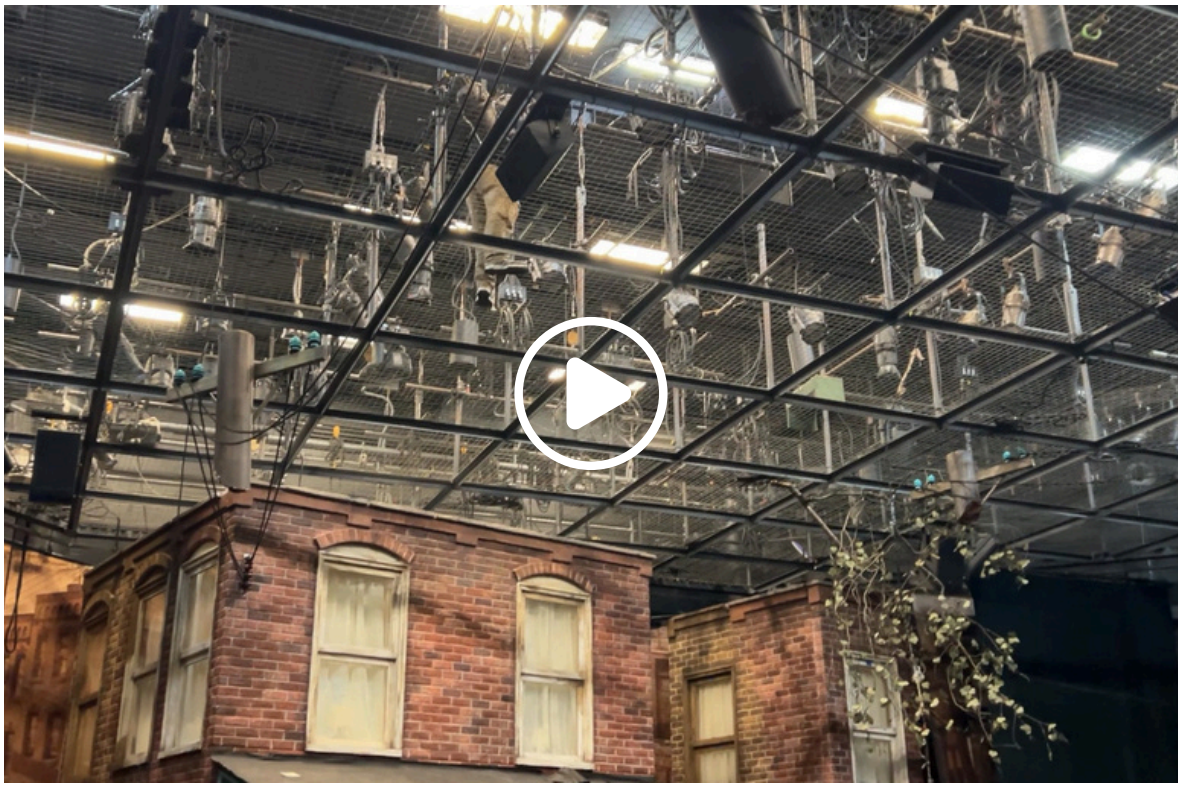
Additional Poetry to connect with:

Harlem by Langston Hughes
"What happens to a dream deferred..."

We wear the Mask by Paul Laurence Dunbar
"We wear the mask that grins and lies..."

Those Winter Sundays by Robert Hayden
"Sundays too my father got up early... no one ever thanked him..."

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY: SCENIC & COSTUME ELEMENTS



EXPLORE MORE by clicking the **play button** above to meet our Assistant Technical Director Scott Grinstead in a virtual tour of our scene shop. In this video, we'll walk you through the build process for ASF's 2026 production of August Wilson's *Fences*.



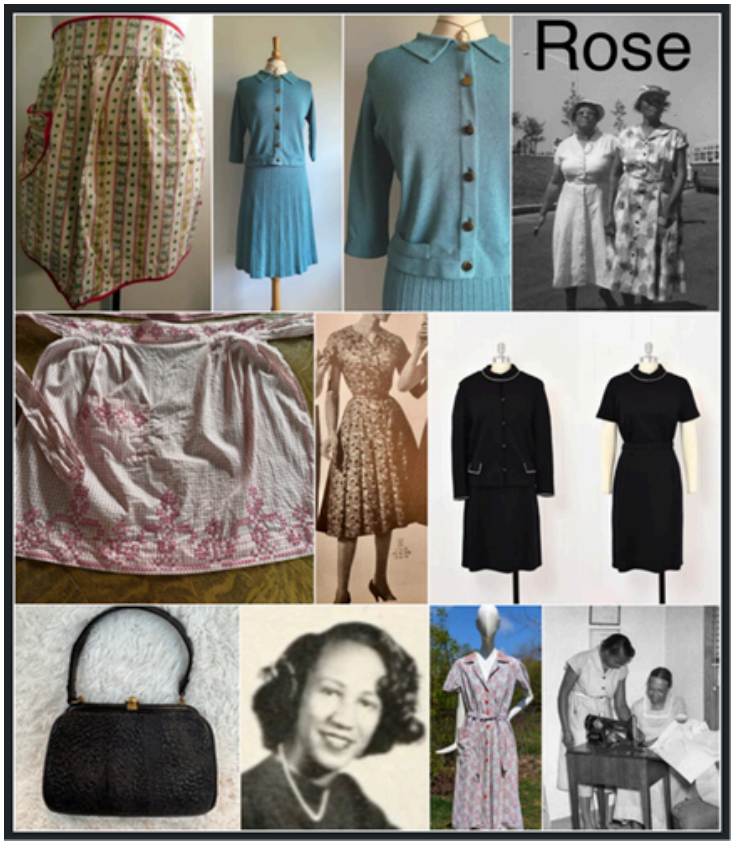


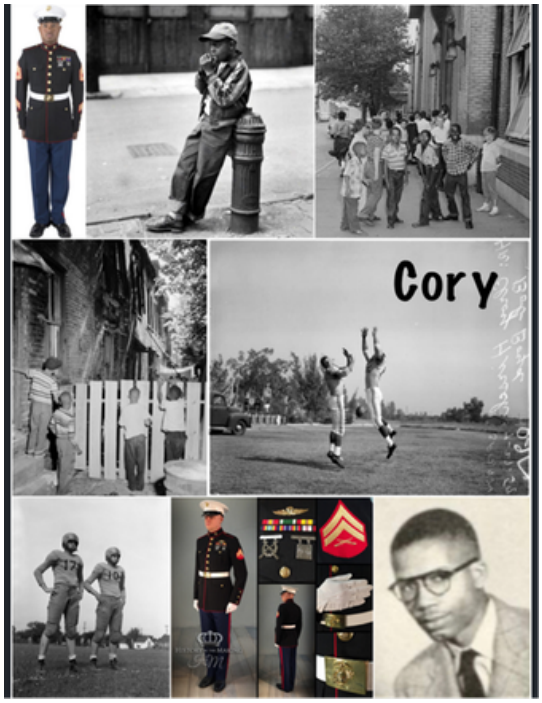
Scenic renderings of ASF's 2026 production of August Wilson's *Fences*. Scenic Design by Isabel & Moriah Curley-Clay.

Think about it: Before seeing the play, think about what the Maxson's yard tells us or reveals about them? How do you think this might connect with themes in the play? Look closely at one detail in the scenic design, such as the porch, the fence, or the objects left in the yard. What does that detail suggest about who they are? Explain.

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY: SCENIC & COSTUME ELEMENTS









Costume design mood boards for ASF's 2026 production of August Wilson's *Fences*. Costume design by Shilla Benning.

Think about it: Look closely at the costume designer's mood boards for *Fences*. What do the images suggest about who they are? After seeing the play, choose a character who isn't represented above and create a mood board with three to five images, colors, or textures. Use details from the script or character descriptions to explain your choices.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What responsibilities come with being part of a family? Who usually gets to define them? Explain.
- Before seeing the play, think about the significance of the title. The play is called *Fences*, but why do you think the playwright chose to use this title to capture the overall meaning of the play? Explain.
- Look back to some of the historical context in this guide. Why do you think the playwright chose to set this play in 1957 and 1965? What was changing at this time in the larger world around the characters? Explain.

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Troy challenges unfair treatment out in the world and exercises harsh authority at home. How does the play help us understand that contradiction? All of the characters struggle with lost dreams, disappointment, and grief. How does that pain shape the way they treat the people they love? Explain.
- Think about boundaries as you watched the play. Which ones are physical and which are racial, economic, generational, or emotional? Explain.
- Share your interpretation of the character Gabriel. Why do you think August Wilson gives Gabriel, a character others often dismiss, the final moment in *Fences*? What was the significance of his role in the story? Explain.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

I. On Your Feet: Do Not Cross! Tell students the following prompt: "One person is about to enter an imaginary doorway. The other holds up a hand to stop them." Have two volunteers use those directions to start a short improv scene. After a moment, call "Freeze!" and have both actors hold their poses. Invite a new volunteer to tap one actor out, take their exact pose, and use it to start a completely different scene. The remaining actor should go along with the new premise. After a few rounds, invite some discussion by asking: How did the same gesture change meaning from one scene to the next? How might a boundary feel protective to one character and controlling to another?

> **Variation:** Make sure students are in very interesting looking poses before calling "Freeze!" The student who taps in will need to assume the pose of the student they are replacing to restart the scene. Encourage students not to plan and to act quickly. For larger groups, divide the class into two teams and let them practice these improv scenes. This is a great pre-show activity to get ready for some of the themes in the play. This activity can get rowdy! It might be helpful to use a bell rather than to yell "freeze!" Have fun!

III. At Your Desk: Living Time Capsule! Have students choose a time and place a living relative or trusted adult might remember firsthand. Ask them to write one focused question and investigate it using historical sources from the period and one credible secondary source. Then, have students interview the adult about what they remember. If an interview isn't possible, students may use a published oral history. In a short response, students should cite all three sources, explain where the accounts agree, and analyze what the oral account adds or challenges and why the accounts of this time period might differ. To connect the activity to *Fences*, ask why might Cory see football as a chance for success, while Troy sees it as a risk? How do their experiences help explain why they disagree?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES AND RESOURCES

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

Anticipation Activity pg. 15

Character Fences pg. 16

Responding to Live Theatre: Critical Response pg. 17

ADDITIONAL ONLINE RESOURCES

August Wilson Society
https://www.augustwilsonsociety.org/

August Wilson and the American Century Cycle
https://awaacc.org/american-century-cycle/

August Wilson biography | National Endowment for the Humanities
https://www.neh.gov/about/awards/national-humanities-medals/august-wilson

Remembering Jackie | National Baseball Hall of Fame
https://baseballhall.org/discover-more/stories/baseball-history/remembering-jackie

Montgomery Bus Boycott | National Park Service
https://www.nps.gov/articles/montgomery-bus-boycott.htm

Civil Rights Act of 1964 | National Archives
https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/civil-rights-act

Voting Rights Act of 1965 | National Park Service
https://www.nps.gov/articles/votingrightsact.htm

ANTICIPATION ACTIVITY: AGREE or DISAGREE
(MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL) PRE-SHOW

Student Name: _____

Before you see the show, respond to the following statements as honestly as possible by circling your response. Then, explain your answer with an example.

SA – Strongly Agree, A – Agree, D – Disagree, SD – Strongly Disagree

STATEMENT #1: Understanding someone's pain makes it much easier to forgive the harm they cause.

SA	A	D	SD

Explain your answer with an example:

STATEMENT #2: Parents should shield their children from the harsh realities of the world for as long as possible.

SA	A	D	SD

Explain your answer with an example:

STATEMENT #3: You should always pursue the truth no matter how painful.

SA	A	D	SD

Explain your answer with an example:

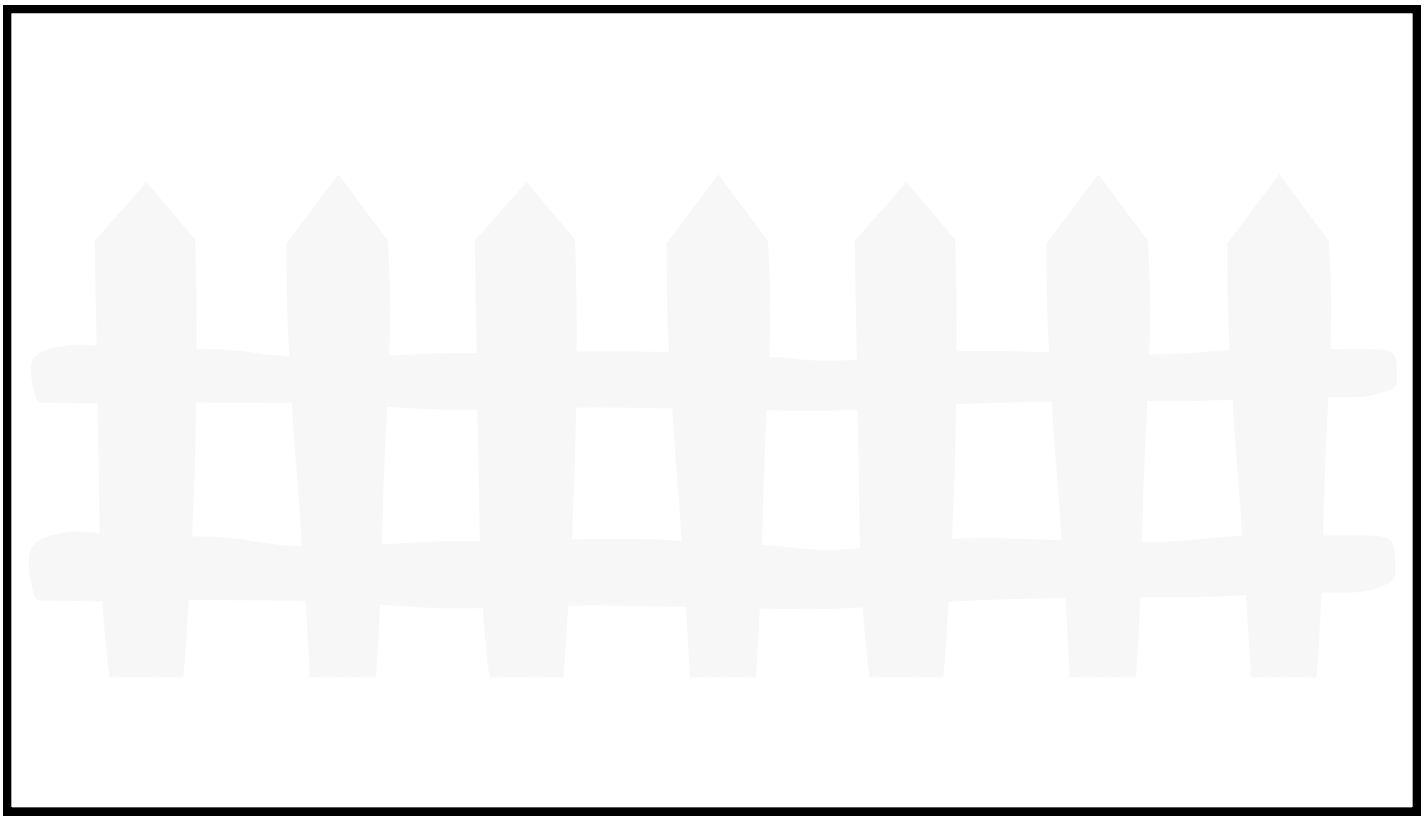
A variation of this activity: "Four Corners." Make signs with the SA, A, D, and SD labels. Then, ask the students to stand in the middle of the classroom. Repeat each question aloud (or create new ones) and allow them to move to the corner of the room that best represents their opinion. Discuss.

CHARACTER FENCES

(MIDDLE SCHOOL, HIGH SCHOOL) POST-SHOW

Student name: _____ Date: _____

Choose a character from the play and design a fence that expresses what that character wants to protect, keep out, or hold onto. Think about height, openings, materials, condition, and what the view looks like through it. Label your three choices below.



My character: _____

Choice 1 and evidence from the play:

Choice 2 and evidence from the play:

Choice 3 and evidence from the play:

Artist's statement: What does your fence design reveal about your character?

Variation: Students may choose to design their own fence with details about themselves instead of details about a character from the play. If a student chooses this option, they may be as detailed or concise as they wish. Please encourage them to refrain from including anything they would not like to share with the class.

ALABAMA SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

RESPONDING TO LIVE THEATRE
(HIGH SCHOOL) POST-SHOW

AUGUST WILSON'S *FENCES*
CRITICAL REVIEW

Directions: Imagine you are the official theatre critic for this production at ASF! For each area of the production, give thoughtful and honest feedback. Be specific and answer each prompt using complete sentences. Use the back of the page if necessary.

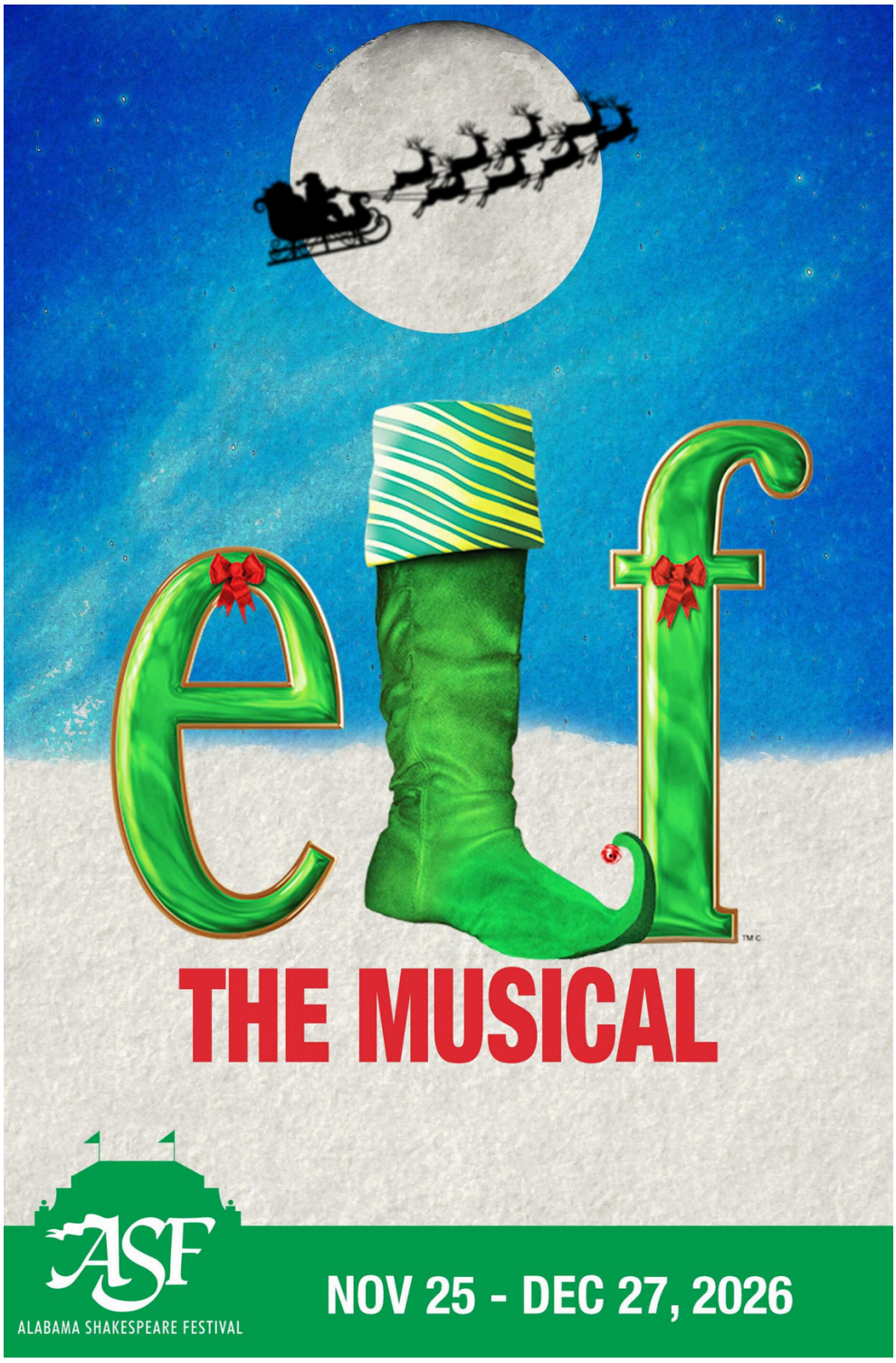
I. Playwright/Story
Use the space below to discuss elements of the story. What worked well? Did anything strike you negatively?

II. Performance/Acting
Use the space below to give constructive feedback about the actors' performances in the production. Was there a performer whom you particularly enjoyed? What could have been better?

III. Directing
Use the space below to discuss the overall direction and interpretation of this production. Remember, nothing happens by accident. Did anything surprise you?

IV. Technical Elements
Use the space below to discuss the lighting, sound, scenery, and costumes for this production. Were you transported to a different time/place? Did these elements effectively serve the story? Explain.

UP NEXT: ELF THE MUSICAL



Find SchoolFest Performance Schedule and More Info at:
www.ASF.net/SchoolFest