

Challenge of 'Fences' Poses No Obstacle for Port City

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April is a wonderful time to enjoy August -- August Wilson, that is, one of the greatest living playwrights in America.

Wilson's two Pulitzer Prize-winning plays opened recently at local theaters, and for those who might be torn between the Arena Stage production of "The Piano Lesson" and Port City Playhouse's "Fences," the best bet is to see both. But if you have to choose one, go to Port City. "Fences" is the better-crafted of the two plays, and while Port City's production has several flaws, Wilson's tale is vividly told, full of heartbreak and hope.

Both dramas are part of Wilson's ambitious series of plays exploring 20th-century African American life. (He is closing in on the last installment, as "Radio Golf" is due soon.) "The Piano Lesson," set in the late 1930s, focuses on a family's clash over an heirloom piano, highlighting Wilson's overarching theme, the conflict between focusing on the past and reaching for the future.

"Fences" begins in 1957, as the civil rights struggle is gathering steam, but too late for Troy Maxson (Michael Sainte-Andress). A once-talented baseball player relegated to Negro League teams before the majors abandoned the color barrier (or fence), he's now an aging garbage collector, cynical about life and unsettled by his teenage son's potential for success.

"Troy just came along too early," his friend, Bono (Paul Andrew Morton), says matter-of-factly. "Ain't never should have been a time called 'too early,' " Troy spits back.

Troy tinkers with building a fence around his yard while creating more durable walls between himself and his wife, his sons and his friends. But for Troy, the fences that he thinks might protect him also restrain him. Teenager Cory (DeLon Howell) has inherited his father's athletic prowess and has an opportunity for a college scholarship. But Troy's response to that sets off a chain of fateful events.

Sainte-Andress goes rapidly to Troy's core, peeling away layers of the emotional barrier surrounding this difficult, damaged man. The anger buried deep within becomes palpable, the atmosphere around him slightly charged and uneasy. That makes his steadfastness to wife and family so initially admirable, and his eventual betrayals of those closest to him so heartbreaking.

Troy is at the center of many lives. He hands his paycheck to his wife, watches over his war-injured brother, grudgingly gives a grown son money and acts as stern taskmaster to his teenage son. Director Ed Bishop has his cast's feet fully on the ground, the performances anchored by multifaceted realism.

There are playful moments. In a Wilson trademark, several homespun songs punctuate the storytelling. The conflict between Sainte-Andress and Howell as father and son crackles with energy and tension, in counterpoint to Troy's subdued sorrow and resentment. Something is missing, however, in critical moments between Troy and his loving, practical wife Rose (Patricia Williams). A pivotal sequence, when the couple deals with two shocking developments, is oddly underplayed by both actors. The fireworks fizzle, the impact of crisis substantially blunted.

Sainte-Andress also does not let us see as clearly as he should that his actions affecting Cory's future

spring from fears and insecurities; his facade of a strict father enforcing family discipline has too few cracks in it. But Wilson wove magic into his textured language that helps us glide past those weak points, the otherwise strong performances arousing potent emotions as rich characters forge new lives from the wreckage Troy creates.

Unfortunately, the Lee Center's sound system is still assaulting ears with a loud, continuous buzz, the price for a few seconds of bluesy music played during scene changes. (The actors do not use microphones.) Theater companies paying rent to the city of Alexandria need to either demand repairs or turn the system off between the brief periods of use.

"Fences," performed by the Port City Playhouse, continues through April 23 at the Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Showtime is 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. (There is also a show at 8 p.m. Tuesday.) For tickets, call 703-838-2880. For tickets and information, visit www.portcityplayhouse.com.