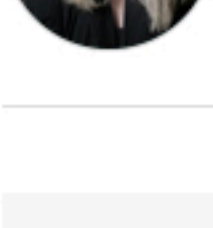


The stories we inherit: SC

Shakespeare builds a remarkable ‘Fences’



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August 7, 2026

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Quick Take

August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize-winning masterpiece “Fences” receives a powerfully acted and deeply moving production from Santa Cruz Shakespeare, led by a remarkable Derrick Lee Weeden and an outstanding ensemble.

Every family inherits a story.

The difficult question is whether we are bound to repeat it.

Some inherit traditions, recipes and treasured heirlooms. Others inherit something far less tangible: expectations that can never be met, dreams left unfulfilled, old resentments carried from one generation to the next. Long before we understand where they came from, those stories begin shaping who we become.

If you go

Who: Santa Cruz Shakespeare
What: August Wilson’s “Fences”
When: Through Aug. 28
Where: The Audrey Stanley Grove at DeLaveaga Park, 501 Upper Park Rd., Santa Cruz
Tickets: [Click here](#) or 831-460-6399

We build fences, too. Some protect the people we love. Others keep us at a safe distance from pain. And sometimes the strongest barriers are the ones we construct within ourselves, built from pride, fear and regret.

Few playwrights understood those invisible fences better than August Wilson.

Like Shakespeare, Wilson found extraordinary poetry in the language of ordinary people. His characters reveal themselves through conversation, transforming everyday arguments, jokes and memories into language that is lyrical, funny and heartbreaking. Through his landmark [American Century Cycle](#), Wilson chronicled African American life across each decade of the 20th century, creating some of the richest, most enduring characters in American theater.

His Pulitzer Prize-winning “Fences” remains his best-known work. Set in 1950s Pittsburgh, it follows Troy Maxson, a former Negro Leagues baseball player whose dreams were cut short by racism before Major League Baseball was integrated. Now a garbage collector, husband and father, Troy struggles to reconcile the disappointments of his past with the hopes his family holds for the future. As old wounds resurface and impossible choices flow through the household, every relationship is tested.

[Santa Cruz Shakespeare](#)’s moving new production, directed by Susan Dalian, trusts Wilson’s language and a remarkable cast. Dalian allows the play’s emotional power to emerge naturally, creating an evening that is both intimate and deeply affecting.

Derrick Lee Weeden inhabits one of American theater’s most challenging roles with remarkable confidence and depth as Troy Maxson. Troy is forever wrestling with the life he believes was stolen from him – denied the opportunity to play in the major leagues due to segregation during his prime – he carries that injustice into every corner of his life. It shapes the husband he becomes, the father he tries to be, and the choices that ultimately define him.



Derrick Lee Weeden gives a deeply moving performance as Troy in “Fences” at Santa Cruz Shakespeare. Credit: Kevin Lohman

Weeden captures every contradiction without ever asking the audience to excuse Troy’s choices. One moment he has the audience laughing as Troy spins one of his larger-than-life stories. The next, a brief silence or hard glance reveals the bitterness quietly simmering beneath the surface. Weeden shows us a deeply wounded man whose flaws grow inevitably from years of disappointment. It is a performance rich with contradiction that stays with you.

Carolyn Ratteray is wonderful as Rose, the family’s emotional anchor. Her strength is not loud but steadfast, holding together a home that threatens to splinter under the weight of Troy’s choices. When Rose finally refuses to carry that burden alone, Ratteray delivers one of the evening’s defining moments with fury and devastating honesty.

Wilson gives every member of this family room to matter, and this cast takes full advantage of it. Michael J. Asberry brings warmth and gentle wisdom to Bono, Troy’s lifelong friend whose observations often speak louder than advice. Iyanu Olukotun gives Cory the restless determination of a young man desperate to build a future beyond his father’s shadow, making the growing conflict between them both inevitable and heartbreaking.



Avondina Wills as Gabriel in “Fences” at Santa Cruz Shakespeare. Credit: Photo courtesy of Santa Cruz Shakespeare

ML Roberts lends Lyons an easy confidence that offers a striking contrast to Troy’s rigid view of responsibility. At the same time, local favorite Avondina Wills delivers a deeply moving Gabriel, revealing the character’s innocence, generosity, and unwavering spiritual faith with remarkable tenderness. As young Raynell, Mamia Biaye brings a welcome sense of hope to the play’s final moments.

This remarkable ensemble understands that “Fences” is never about a single character. Every conversation, silence and shared glance deepens Wilson’s portrait of family, responsibility and the legacies we leave behind.

Susan Dalian’s direction is remarkably understated, allowing the audience to slip quietly into the Maxsons’ world rather than constantly reminding us we’re watching a play. Before long, it feels less like theater than eavesdropping. We become the neighbor on the other side of the fence, listening as Troy and Bono swap stories, laugh, argue and wrestle with the disappointments of their lives as though we shouldn’t be hearing any of it. That sense of intimacy becomes one of the production’s greatest strengths, drawing us so completely into these lives that we almost forget we’re sitting in an audience.

That connection is evident throughout the evening. Troy’s stories regularly send laughter rippling through the Grove. Later, during Rose’s fiery Act 2 monologue, that laughter disappears. Ratteray commands the stage with such emotional force that the audience sits in absolute silence before rising together for a standing ovation.

Michael Schweikardt’s scenic design creates a modest Pittsburgh backyard framed by photographic scrimms of aging apartment buildings. The warm palette of browns, yellows and weathered neutrals immediately places us in the Maxsons’ neighborhood without ever drawing attention away from the actors.

Patrice N. Trower’s costumes blend naturally into that landscape, while Luke Shepherd’s sound design and original compositions weave gentle touches of 1950s jazz throughout the evening, quietly grounding the story in its time and place.

Running nearly three hours, “Fences” asks audiences to embrace its deliberate pace. Wilson isn’t interested in spectacle or sudden twists. He lets conversations unfold, allowing characters to reveal themselves one story at a time. Some theatergoers might find that rhythm demanding, but those willing to settle into it will discover a play rich with emotional rewards.



Iyanu Olukotun (left) as Cory with Derrick Lee Weeden as Troy in “Fences” at Santa Cruz Shakespeare. Credit: Kevin Lohman

The circumstances surrounding Troy Maxson’s life belong to a particular time and place in American history, but the questions Wilson asks transcend generations of any family. How much of our parents’ lives do we carry with us? Can we escape the disappointments we inherit? And what do we unknowingly pass on to those who come after us?

Those are the invisible fences Wilson asks us to consider.

Some protect us. Some confine us.

The hardest ones to recognize are often the ones we’ve been carrying all along.