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Fences

By August Wilson
Directed by Lou Bellamy
Presented by Cargill

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SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: THE DIRECTOR

by Stephanie Lein Walseth, August Wilson Fellow
September 3, 2008 at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota

Stephanie Lein Walseth: As this production of *Fences* is running, we find ourselves in a unique political moment that merits our attention. With Barack Obama being the Democratic candidate for president, how do you think his campaign and the dialogue around it affect the work and the stories that August Wilson tells? It seems as if the Obama narrative is often shaped as one of 'exceptionalism,' whereas Wilson seems to focus on the everyman and woman in the African American community.

Lou Bellamy: Wilson tends to find epic proportions in everyday black life, and the degree to which that is reflected in Obama's position and rise is really interesting. He is, by all measures, a very average person. I mean, he came from average beginnings. Middle-America. Of course, Hawaii, we'll let that go, it's a little exotic, but those are his beginnings. What August tends to celebrate is the way those everyday choices—when connected to a continuum of parents, aunts, grandparents, forefathers and so on—begin to show a wave, or a current that runs through the people. Mr. Wilson calls it "the blood memory." I tend to think of the world only in terms of my sixty years. But, when you begin to look at yourself as part of that longer continuum, then it begins to gain a certain amount of power. You find that many times your individual choices are shaped by your environment, history, and a culture about which you may or may not be aware. Wilson tends to write in those huge cultural kinds of moments, and Senator Obama acknowledges all of that history. In fact, his unique history, in not having dealt with slavery, positions him, in my view, in a very strong place in the United States. He is a black man, an American, who isn't marked by that terrible institution and the relationships it created between whites and blacks. So, he comes to the table fresh. It allows him a latitude that few blacks born of American ancestors have.

Lein Walseth: Interesting. In terms of the continuum you mention, you touched on another one of my questions, which has to do with the intergenerational conflicts that you note in your Artistic Director's statement for the season. I would say that this definitely emerges as one of the dominant themes in *Fences*. Tell me a little bit about how you see that conflict played out in this piece.

Bellamy: It's so interesting, the intergenerational effect of white racism on Troy Maxon. He wages battles against it constantly, although it's rather tangential to the story. It is there, sort of in the background, and it shapes his choices, just like we were talking about with the previous question. He makes individual choices based upon his experience, and his experience is warped by racism, so he cannot see, for instance, that Cory could turn a football scholarship into something positive. He only knows the way he was robbed of *his* dream because of the racism that only allowed him to play in the Negro Leagues. So, it's there.

I also love the way August takes responsibility for blacks being prepared to fight racism. You remember that scene where Troy describes his fights and eventual victories in the argument with his boss about the policy that keeps whites driving the garbage trucks and blacks walking behind, lifting and emptying the garbage cans? Then after he wins the argument, it becomes evident that he doesn't have a driver's license! So he's not prepared to actualize the hard-fought victory that he's won. He has to go back and become educated on how to drive. *Then* he can do it. So, although it isn't always mentioned, racism, and its affect upon the individual, is there, shaping this family in so many ways. You hear Bono say, "I thought only white folks had inside toilets." It's these little bitty things that shape one's view of the world. What is so tragic about

Troy is that he can't see it, even though his wife tries to get this through to him. She says, "It's there and you can't even see it." And he won't because he's been shaped, he's been fired in a kiln that has inured all of this stuff in him and it's unchangeable. That's the pity of it; that children can be shaped in that same sort of way. How will Cory play out? Black families have always tried to shield their children from that, but they can't. They have to grow up and they have to go past the protection of that shield that their parents put around them. I remember when they burned that cross in front of my grandmother's house, how I kept trying to turn around and she kept turning my head around and putting it in her bosom so I couldn't. But she couldn't stop me from seeing those flames, you know? It's a tough row to hoe.

Lein Walseth: Yes, absolutely.

Bellamy: It shapes you and... it makes you into something that otherwise, I think you would not be.

Lein Walseth: You raise an issue that is present in all of Wilson's work, which is his ability to locate the experiences of a people in one family, in one play, in one decade, and then to connect those individuals to the larger community and the larger structural issues and events of that socio-historical moment. So, what would you say we could extrapolate about the larger African American experience and the living legacy of slavery in the 1950s from the Maxon family?

Bellamy: Here again, in *Fences*, that continuum is so clear. When Troy left after the fight with his father, he says it was 1918, and he was 14 years old. Which means that his father was most likely around during slavery, or was one of the first generation of sharecroppers. And that system was set up, as you well know, so that the southern planter aristocracy could keep slavery going for a few more years. These blacks didn't have land, they didn't have anything. They were turned loose after slavery like cattle. The slave owners just opened up the proverbial gate and said, "Here, off you go." Well, go where? Do what? So this first generation of freed slaves had no land base and they had no power. Forty acres and a mule didn't happen for most of them. So, they were forced to enter into these sharecropping agreements where they bartered their bodies again, their hard work, for *maybe* a promise of buying some land and a share of the harvest. Troy talks about how his father was shaped by that system, about how mean it made him, and how he would work the whole family, just like in slavery, just so they could get enough money to make this little note, only to find out at the end of the year that they "owed Mister Lubin money." Now, how does that shape Troy? Well, he had to enter into this relationship with his father. He fought him, he had to leave, and the same thing ends up happening with Cory. So, these things are sort of passed down.

Ntozake Shange has this wonderful quote about minstrelsy and I'm sure that one could apply it to slavery. She says, "We're not free from our paint yet." [laughs] And we're not free of those vestiges of slavery – what it did to the black family, what it did to the way we interact amongst ourselves based on color. It's underneath much of the interaction between blacks in America, and certainly the interaction between whites and blacks in America.

Lein Walseth: Definitely.

Bellamy: Oh yeah.

Lein Walseth: Again, just like you said, it's what makes this Obama campaign so unique and so interesting.

Bellamy: We are at a very interesting point in time.

Lein Walseth: Let's talk a little bit about Troy, specifically, because this is a role that you have played more than once, correct?

Bellamy: Twice, yeah.

Lein Walseth: Once in the 1997 production that Penumbra did at the Guthrie, and when was the other?

Bellamy: That production was in the 1989-1990 season. It ran here at Penumbra and then moved downtown for six months, in the space where the History Theatre is now. It used to be the old Actors' Theatre, and we were the first ones in their space after they closed. Coincidentally, they came to visit me and told me that we couldn't call ourselves professional because *they* were professional and we *weren't*. Well, they're defunct now and we're still going, so history has a way of writing itself.... Anyway, yeah, I played the role, and some folks said successfully.

Lein Walseth: [Laughs] What elements of those previous productions have been woven into this one, and where do you think you have a different take on it now?

Bellamy: Well, it's a different world than it was then. There is an interesting parallel though, because Troy's career was at its height just before the major leagues were integrated, and here we are in a political and cultural moment just when a black man (Senator Obama) is positioned to break another barrier. We think we've arrived and that we're so much better than those that came before us, and then we see this piece, firmly ensconced in the 1950s, and every one of those issues is still relevant and meaningful today.

As far as the production, the woman who played Rose with me, Rebecca Rice, has now passed. I loved her, my God, I loved her. And so, I shaped this show so that I could see her onstage. So many of the things that she and I did show up in this production, and it's been lovely to see that those choices we made still stand up and work.

Lein Walseth: Since you've brought us back to Troy, I have to confess that watching the show, I literally wanted to get out of my seat, walk up onstage and punch him.

Bellamy: I know.

Lein Walseth: [Laughs] I don't know if that's what you were going for...

Bellamy: He's a tough case. During the time I was creating the role, myself, I hated him. Oh, Stephanie, I hated him. We'd sit and I'd bitch and moan and cry and just...I *hated* him, I *hate* men like that. Men who hold that kind of power over their the families, in this case over seventy six dollars and some cents. It's nothing. But then as I got in there and began to see how he was shaped and found those parts of me in the character—[ah] it was just *astounding*. He's more real, and there's more of him in us than we might want to admit. When I played the role, I had people from Austria, from Japan, from all over the world come up and just hug me and say, "That's my father. *That's my father.*" So, there is something captured there in that relationship between he and his son. And you see, he's trying to prepare him for the world that *he* [Troy] knew, not the world that *is*. The world that Cory must confront. And it's so sad, and Troy is so earnest, and he's so responsible about it and he's trying to make Cory strong. But what hurt me the most (when I was creating the role) was when Troy breaks that boy down...

Lein Walseth: Oh, that just *crushed* me.

Bellamy: ...just took everything away from him, just took it all away before our eyes, and called that preparation. He tells Cory he's going to take away his college education, and that he has to go get his job back at the A&P. [gasps, then laughs]

Lein Walseth: And you just see, in those moments, that generational conflict.

Bellamy: Oh yeah, but the preparation is honest and earnest, like I said. But, it's for a time that's gone. Troy can't see that. Again, we see the effect of racism. The way in which it moves from generation to generation.

Lein Walseth: I think one of the most interesting things about Troy is how he constructs different narratives about himself based on his present company. He tells so many different stories throughout this piece that you really get to see the different sides of his psyche and personality. When he's holding his new baby and he begins to tell his story to a fresh, innocent being...I was really blown away. Talk about history writing itself – in those moments you can clearly see that he is writing history as he wants it to be.

Bellamy: This is a perfect example of the way Wilson's work monumentally transforms from the page and the stage. You are not ready for that guy to fill up this theatre. You think you are, 'cause you read it, [both laugh] but you're not ready for the immenseness of the character.

Lein Walseth: And in this space you feel like you're in the backyard with...

Bellamy: Or right across the street...

Lein Walseth: ... yeah, just talking with the characters, and I think that just drives it home. I think there's something, an intimacy that you can't get anywhere else but this space, you know? It's really powerful. And so, just as Troy is a tremendously difficult role, I think Rose has an equally difficult battle.

Bellamy: I think so, and I wanted her to be his equal. I didn't want him to dominate her. She stands up to him, you know, when they have the fight, she's fighting back. She only loses because she's not *physically* able to match him.

But she brings baggage to her relationship with Troy as well, and she faces up to it. She said that she "wanted a house to sing in," and that she knew what she was doing. It surprised her, when she mixed up all the pieces of his life and hers, how he dominated her. But she said, "I saw that happening and I grabbed it. I grabbed it with both hands because this was my chance."

I love when he admits he's going to be a daddy, and she starts out, she takes it, and then I directed her to sit down when she couldn't stand any longer. He just [snap] nails her with that and she goes, "Oh, my God." She's got to sit there. And then she launches into, "You know I never wanted any of this. In my family it's always your daddy and your daddy and my daddy, and nobody can all sit down together, and oh, my God." And then she gathers herself and she rises up out of that moment. She comes at him because she's got that in her, that kind of power.

She's also representative of the black women that I know, with their supportive and eternal depth of love. Even though this man has hurt her beyond what someone should be expected to endure, she does not try to poison those children against him. When Cory comes in she finds the strength to let him be a man without hating his father. (You might notice that I did the same blocking for him when he told her as when Troy told her. She's going in the door, he's right by the gate, and he turns and he says, "Mama, I got something to tell you," just like his daddy did.

She's in those same places with these two men.) And she's raising this girl and she says, "If God gives me the strength, I'm going to do him just like your father did you" (oh...I'm going to cry) "I'm going to try and give her the best that's in me." What's better?

Lein Walseth: Mm hmm.

Bellamy: Yeah, I think that she's a real strong chick. [Laughs]

Lein Walseth: Absolutely.

Bellamy: I've heard folks say that August writes these women that are always in aprons. Well, yeah, she was, but that wasn't *Leave it to Beaver* up there. And it's the same time frame, the same topoi.

Lein Walseth: That's a definite distinction. Ok, now that you've some tears going, we've gotta mix in the laughter, which you always try to do in your productions, right? I noticed that in this piece this juxtaposition happens pretty frequently – there will be a moment of deep, abiding sadness and then right on top of that comes another moment, like when Rose says what she does about "your daddy and my daddy..." [both laugh], and the whole audience just cracks up. And in that moment you're saying to yourself, "I don't think I should be laughing!" But, you have to laugh because you need a release! It happens through Gabe too, in those moments when the tension is so thick you could cut it with a knife. In he comes and just splits it right open.

Bellamy: Still, you're *held* there. You want that resolution so badly...

Lein Walseth: Yeah, yeah...

Bellamy: ...and Gabe's in there being a fool! The same thing happens in *The Piano Lesson* when Wining Boy enters exactly at one of those spots. Berniece and Boy Willie are getting ready to shoot each other and he comes in...

Lein Walseth: I know, exactly! I was thinking while watching it, "This is a Wining Boy moment!"

Bellamy: It's a wonderful technique and I've learned, in working so much on August's texts, how to do it in other plays. It works. And people love it. I love it, you know, to laugh through tears. It's beautiful.

Lein Walseth: The question that most people ask me, when they know I'm working on Wilson's 20th Century Cycle, is, "What are the differences in these plays?" And, to some extent, I think the more interesting question is, "How does each of these plays animate the living legacy of slavery in the different decades?" The more of his work that you see and read, the more you really begin to see the similarities...

Bellamy: ...you sure do.

Lein Walseth:...and you see these touchpoints that he always includes: the food, you know, there's always mention of specific foods, and place names, and that south to north migration, and music, and gender conflict, and all sorts of common threads that weave through....

Bellamy: Yeah, oh yeah. And the repository of knowledge shaped from generation to generation through stories and storytelling.

Lein Walseth: Also, I think we have to mention the supernatural element in this piece, which also shows up in so much of Wilson's work. In *The Piano Lesson*, we have the ghost of Sutter, In *Gem of the Ocean* we have the City of Bones that gets created onstage, and in this piece we have the hellhounds that chase Gabe and Death that Troy has to wrestle with. So, what do you make of this? And how do you work to convey those concepts of the supernatural in production?

Bellamy: For the African American consciousness, that isn't a big step. [laughs] It's always there. I mean, I think it's there for the African, I *know* it's there for the African American. My grandmother would *see* things and *do* things. She came into the house one time from emptying trash there at 1119 Sherburne, and she said, "Oh my God, someone's going to die in the family." She said that something had tugged at her dress while she was emptying trash and she said, "Every time that happens, somebody dies." Well, bless Jesus, someone *did* die in the family. So, it's always there. There's some sort of paranormal, sympathetic magic that is possible.

I remember I brought home a girlfriend once, and nobody in the house liked her, and as I was going out, I looked back and grandma was throwing salt at the door so she wouldn't come back. [Both laugh] I mean, it's just a part of who you *are*, so it isn't a big step for that kind of stuff to go down.

I had to massage it a little in *The Piano Lesson*. I had that train motif coming through there, so that you could think, "Okay, this ghost thing is the train, maybe, and that's what's shaking the house." But, in this one, he gives you another reason for Death being present: he always shows up when Troy's in a weakened state. The first time is when he was in the hospital and Rose said he was laying there with a fever, "talkin plum out of his head, "talkin 'bout Death and all that and how he wrestled with him." So, when you get Troy weakened, that's when this, this *thing* shows up. I think it shows up for all of us in those states. Have you ever been sick, Stephanie, I mean like really sick?

Lein Walseth: When I was younger, yeah.

Bellamy: It's a little different, the world and your place in it and so forth. I think that's what he's getting at. So, in terms of the production, we conveyed Death through a light downstage. I made the choice to have him in the center, though, and to separate his swing of the bat at the end with that light source, because I didn't want it to be a direct, physical connection. I wanted it still kind of in his head, so that the audience wonders, "Is this real? Is he seeing it?"

Lein Walseth: So, to return to the beginning of our conversation, what do you hope audiences will walk away from this production with, given our current moment with Barack Obama's run for the presidency? Given that the world has changed since you last mounted this play, what do you think will resonate with them?

Bellamy: I think one of the things is the terrible conditioning and shaping that is done by that kind of injustice. It's the injustice that has shaped the Maxon family. And you can see how it just goes on and on. It's just such a terrible loss. We have now, perhaps, an opportunity to do something about that, to get some different views and people sitting at the table instead of the same old guys sitting there, making the same old damn decisions. You know? And maybe we can begin to turn that around. So perhaps they'll leave with an understanding of the way their choices shape other people's lives. That would be *really cool*.

Lein Walseth: Great, thank you so much.

Bellamy: Thank you, Stephanie.