

The 2008-2009 Season is proudly presented by Star Tribune and Minnesota Monthly

Fences

By August Wilson
Directed by Lou Bellamy
Presented by Cargill

August 21 through September 21, 2008
Previews August 19 & 20

DESIGN STATEMENTS

The creative design team is responsible for making the text on the page into a literal reality onstage. By using sound, lighting, set and costumes elements, the designers create an atmosphere inside which the actors play. Designers use methods such as color, temperature, or volume to help them as they work. Each of these methods can create a feeling onstage based on which tools the designer chooses to use.

In production, the design elements come together with the text, the actors and the direction, to create a three dimensional world. Penumbra Theatre is guided by an ensemble aesthetic, which means that no element is more important than another. This is Penumbra's ethical approach to art, in which every voice is unique, necessary and communally rooted. This approach also creates artistic balance and excellence. The audience often does not realize that any of the elements were at one time separate. They are totally bound; the result is something greater than the sum of each of its parts. Patrons of Penumbra Theatre Company often say the work looks effortless because the end result feels magical, feels surreal. This is one way the creative team, including the director, designers, cast and crew, can evaluate the success of their endeavor.

It is not magic, though. A lot of work goes into creating a production. Here you can read about the intent of the designers, how they arrived at their concepts and what challenges and methods they used to make their part of the play come to life. (For information on production internships, please visit our website at www.penumbratheatre.org, or call 651-288-6791)

SCENE DESIGN LANCE BROCKMAN

All of the action for August Wilson's *Fences* takes place in the backyard of a row house in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The yard is filled with the history of this house that was probably built right after the turn of the century. Many of the buildings in this African-American section of the city were built from indigenous materials such as brick facades with limestone foundations. What characterizes most of the homes is that they were built adjacent to the sidewalks with little front yard and very close to each other and in many instances, sharing a common wall between units. Therefore, the backyard became space for escape from the heat of the house during the summer and for family interaction.

Many of the stage settings for this popular play, place the house and porch of Troy and Rose Maxon directly facing the audience. To achieve a sense of distance and to create a sense of the terrain of the Hill District, the house in our production is placed diagonally on the stage leading the audience visually to the historic photograph that shows a view over the tops of many of the roofs in the Hill District across the river to downtown Pittsburgh. As a point of interest, the house represented upstage or behind the Maxon's is done in a reduced scale (i.e. the doors and windows are proportionately scaled down in size) so that the neighbor's house appears more distant while helping lead the eye to the photographic backdrop.

It has always been my desire to design a play by August Wilson as he creates such rich characters filled with great energy and in most instances, hope. With such well defined characters, the scenic designer's primary job is to provide a logical environment that allows the interaction of the characters to just plausibly occur. As a bonus, it is also my great pleasure to work with Lou Bellamy--the director on this production. He not only played the role of Troy Maxon himself, but also provides for me as the designer, great insights to both these rich characters and to life for the African-American community in Pittsburgh in the 1950s.

SOUND/MEDIA DESIGN

MARTIN GWINUP

One of designer's main goals is to support the intent and vision as laid out by the playwright and director while bringing their own artistic contributions to the production. Sometimes this can be a very complex task and at other times fairly simple. However in my experience it is always a challenge. As the sound designer for the production I need to support the story and intent of the production while not taking away from the performance or distracting the audience. Quite often the best sound design is the one where the audience is not aware of the sound after the performance but would be aware of its absence if it wasn't there. *Fences* has a very powerful story to tell using strong fascinating characters. The sound design will support this through environmental effects to help fill in location and time period. There will also be some effects to help support the more expressionistic moments when Troy is talking about "death" and to help support Gabe's special world. There will also be music to help with the transitions from scene to scene and to help portray time passing. It will also be used to help support the culture, passion, and emotion of the characters involved. *Fences* is not a play about sound but I hope to support the rest of the artists and technicians in the telling of the story.

LIGHTING DESIGN

DON DARNUTZER

The lighting for *Fences* helps support the vision of the director and setting created by the set designer and costume designer. The lighting follows the emotional arc of the play by use of color, intensity or brightness and direction of the lighting. My job also sets the time of year, day or night, any atmospheric effects or special effects that the script might have call for. Sometimes the playwright may not have specified the lighting for a scene for the show. So I collaborate with the director and the other designers in defining what our concept of the script will be and what the lighting needs will be for the production. I have done some scripts more than once with different results each time I design it. Every director has his/her own concept of that play and what the requirements that are needed for the lighting design.

My job in some ways is like the cameraman and film editor when they create a film. The lighting designer directs the audience's focus during the performance to the most important part of the stage at anytime to help tell the story, much like the film editor does when "cutting" the film. The audience may be or not, aware the hundreds of lighting changes taking place during the performance.

COSTUME DESIGN

MATTHEW J. LEFEBVRE

The challenge in designing the costumes for *Fences* stems from the epic nature of this very human play. This is an epic play. An intimidating play. The characters are simultaneously epic characters living very real lives in a very real existence in the 1950s in Pittsburgh. I've heard Lou Bellamy compare this play to Shakespeare's *King Lear*. The challenge for the design is to honor the epic nature of these characters and their struggle, while maintaining a sense of believability by coming up with clothes that are rational extensions of the characters. I find great inspiration in photography of the period, especially the photography of Teeny Harris who documented daily life in Pittsburgh (including the Hill district) at the time the play was written. These photos are great documentation of what kind of clothing people wore at this time, but it

is far more than simply a guide to texture, pattern, and scale. The photos show the attitudes of the characters and how these attitudes are reflected through the clothing and how it was worn.

As a costume designer, I couldn't help but notice how a theme of "uniforms" runs through this play on an almost subliminal level. Troy was an extremely gifted baseball player in the Negro Leagues, but racism and segregation denied him the success and recognition he could have achieved. Troy's son Cory has the potential to be a very successful pro football player. Sports figures wear uniforms that are on one level utilitarian, but on another, they are symbolic: the Gladiator, the Warrior, and the Champion. Although we never see Troy's uniform, we get the sense he was all this and more. We do get a glimpse of Cory's football uniform, but it isn't presented in its full glory. This is done to reinforce Troy's desire to keep Cory in his place. Cory's football uniform is replaced at the end of the play with another uniform, that of a sergeant in the USMC.

There are other variations of uniforms in the play. Troy and Bono as sanitation workers wear utilitarian gear that reflects the work they do. Rose wears the 1950's housewife equivalent of a uniform: cotton dresses and aprons which are this strange combination of utilitarian femininity. Rose never stops working. Every scene in this play she is either doing laundry, cooking, darning socks, and countless other chores to keep the household running. For her costumes, I relied heavily on vintage clothes from the 1950s. You obviously can't beat them for period authenticity, but more than that, they have the lived-in, workhorse quality these clothes need to have.

Lyons, Troy's other son from a previous marriage also wears a uniform of sorts. He fancies himself a jazz musician, but there are implications that his musical talents are not nearly as impressive as the athletic abilities of either Troy or Cory. To overcompensate for that shortcoming, he overdresses the part of the jazz musician.

The two uniforms that we never see in the play are the two that have the greatest symbolic power for the actions of the play: Troy's baseball uniform, and Gabriel's military uniform. There is a sense of mystique conjured up when characters in the play talk about Troy's talent on the ball field. His athletic prowess is allowed to manifest itself in the mind of the audience precisely because we never actually see a representation of how he looked in uniform. The juxtaposition of the greatness of that mental-image, with the humble, utilitarian reality of man in garbage-soaked clothes is a powerful image that propels the action of the play, and is a constant reminder to Troy, as well as the audience of what could/should have been.

Although we also don't see Gabriel's uniform in the play, I thought it was important to have a couple of remaining elements of the uniform such as combat boots and dog-tags mixed with civilian clothing. Gabriel's military uniform is significant not only because his diminished condition is a result of being wounded in action, but it also serves as foreshadowing of a very possible similar fate for Cory in Vietnam.