



"Fences" movie poster. (Photo source:
<https://oionline.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/FENCES-movie-poster2--825x315.jpg>.)

Film Review: 'Fences' is Emotionally Painful and Beautiful, Driven by Its Cast

By: Justin Hartsell

["Fences"](#) is a film that equally exposes racial, socioeconomic tensions while representing the challenges of maintaining a healthy family.

[Adapted from August Wilson's play](#) and directed by [Denzel Washington](#), the movie packs its cinematic punches within its dialogue, raw acting and limitation to very few settings for the movie to play out in—with the majority being in an urban backyard.

The film proved to be unique in that I, a Caucasian writer, could not say that I knew what it was like to feel the constant socioeconomic discriminations and hardships that a suppressed African-American family dealt with in the 1950s. However, I found myself feeling as if some of what I was watching was stolen from a hidden journal that I never kept physically, but mentally. Various scenes of confrontations and emotional vulnerability made my head warm, on the brink of sweating, when seeing some of the very conversations a son has with his dad on screen play out that I, myself, have had with my own father.

[Owen Gleiberman of Variety writes](#), "Yet if Wilson's play is on some level timeless, only rarely does "Fences," as a movie, hit you with solar plexus with its relevance.

When it does hit the viewer in their emotions without any apology, the impact is so strong that I could not help but choke up in the film—a response I do not typically get from movies.

“Fences” is a story that follows Troy (Denzel Washington), a garbage collector for the City of Pittsburgh in 1957. We quickly see his awareness and irritation with racial tensions when he tells his friend, Bono ([Stephen McKinley Henderson](#)), about asking his supervisor, “Why you got the white mens [sic] driving and the colored lifting?” They continue with bantering when they get off from work, make it to Troy’s lower, middle-class home, and share drinks of gin in his backyard to start off the weekend.

It is in this very backyard that we discover Troy’s former days of being a professional baseball player who was too old to get a chance at the major league. His bitterness is towards [Jackie Robinson](#) getting a chance and Troy not getting the same chance—though the times have changed since Troy was young. He is bitter about working all of his life and not even having “a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out of.” His life is filled with work, bitterness, anger and self-pride.



Scene from "Fences," starring Denzel Washington and Viola Davis. (Photo source:

<https://agoodmovietowatch.com/wp-content/uploads/fences.jpg>.)

The backyard, front street and interior of the humble home is where we see Troy’s wife, Rose ([Viola Davis](#)), display her dedication to Troy, the power-struggle between Troy and his sons, the banter between Troy and Bono, and the concern Troy has for his brother, Gabe ([Mykelti Williamson](#)), who has brain damage from serving in World War II and now seems to have a display of [scrupulosity](#). All of this can be seen within the vicinity of Troy’s house, especially his backyard. Thus, the actors and script are challenged to come alive in strong dialogue and stage presence, with the camera doing very little to elevate the film’s presentation.

[Odie Henderson, a writer for Roger Ebert, put it this way](#), “[The camera] is listening as intently as we in the audience are.” Henderson goes on to point out that this keen sense of listening is what allows the dialogue to work so well, with reference to Troy using the N-word at varying times in the film. When speaking to his friend, Bono, Troy uses it as a “term of endearment.” However, when it is his son challenging his authority and sense of respect, Troy “hurls it with the fury of a klansman.” This clear, yet subtle, difference would be lost if the camera was trying to force action, rather than the actors simply being given an almost-static space on screen to live.

[Los Angeles Times reviewer Kenneth Toran writes](#), “Washington’s direction...gives off the unmistakable feeling that any attempt at cinematic excitement would be counterproductive if not sacrilegious.” Toran continues, “...despite this lack of visual involvement, the combination of top acting and powerful rhythm of the language in the drama’s celebrated high spots absolutely holds us.”

It is this dialogue that I found “Fences” wrenching my heart. Troy’s convictions cannot be discounted when seeing the breaks he was not given from hardships simply because he is African-American. He fought for what he has, which he acknowledges is not much, but what he *does* have is *his*. The disconnect in his family comes from Troy thinking the best thing he can do for his family is work hard and support them, whereas the other members of the family value emotional health. It is in this oversight by the character that I found traces of verbal and emotional confrontations in my own life that arose between my father and myself growing up.

The final—and quite possibly the most important—thing to note, though, is that the film is highlighting racial tensions in American socioeconomics that still relate today. [A.O. Scott writes in The New York Times](#), “‘Fences’ is...about the African-American experience that amounts to a critique of the American dream from the standpoint of people intent on defying their exclusion from it.” It is not a movie whose subject matter is only relevant to 1957, but rather, is ever-present to today when considering the issues of white-privilege and the racial struggles of being able to survive day-to-day (i.e. robbing, prison, low-income jobs, single-parents). It allows for representation of African-Americans on screen with an all African-American cast while also relating to all members of race with the emotional trials of being part of a family. In conclusion, it just furthers the narrative of how trivial it is that society has been constructed on race and that we all have the same needs and wants as human beings—skin color does not change that.

“Fences” currently has a [92% on Rotten Tomatoes](#). It is PG-13 and runs for 2 hours and 13 minutes.