Written by Thom White
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Fences might more aptly be titled *Porches*, as author August Wilson's characters spend much of the play sitting on a porch, swapping stories. Yet the script is so well written - with its raw, realistic dialogue and slice-of-life style - that it's not surprising that Wilson's drama won both the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1987 and the Tony Award for Best Revival of a Play just last month. And while Monday night's preview performance of the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's *Fences* wasn't quite at the award-worthy level, the production*s* houldn't be overlooked when planning a night at the theatre.

The sixth in Wilson's 10-part Pittsburgh Cycle - which focuses on the African-American experience in 20th-Century America - *Fences* is set primarily in the late 1950's. Garbage collector Troy Maxson (Fred Harris Jr.) is the patriarch of his family, which includes his wife of 18 years, Rose (Shanna Cramer), their son, Cory (Tylin Roberts), and Troy's son from a previous relationship, Lyons (Reggie Jarrell), who seems to only stop by to borrow money. Taking place in a time of great change, the play finds Troy adamant that his experiences - both racial and vocational - won't be experiences shared by Cory, even if preventing his son from following in his footsteps calls for tough love and violent arguments.

Unfortunately, the play's poignancy was somewhat lost during the *Fences* preview, mostly due to Harris' performance. That's not to say that Harris was bad in the role; the problem was, he wasn't bad *enough*. His Troy was so amiable, so likable, that it was hard not to see him as the hero even when, at times, he's the villain - especially in relation to Roberts' character. Troy is overly hard on Cory, sometimes to the point of physical abuse, but Harris' anger was never frightening, and when he grabbed a baseball bat to strike the young man, I did not believe this character would actually abuse his son. Don't misunderstand me; I liked Harris' performance. The production, though, can be a deeper experience, emotionally, if Harris embraces the darker side of Troy's personality.

Cramer, however, did grasp *Rose's* anger. Fairly even-keeled in her character's emotions throughout much of the play, Cramer unleashed her rage following a devastating mid-play confession. At that point, her Rose became not only a woman scorned, but a woman betrayed, and Cramer gave a performance mixing both fury and sadness - beautiful and terrifying to behold.

Director Craig Michaels' production also boasts a number of other memorable portrayals. According to the program, *Fences* marks not only Roberts' Playcrafters debut, but his *stage* debut, as well, and had I not read that, I wouldn't have known it at all. Roberts seems a natural talent - on Monday, he was arguably the most believable of any actor on stage - and I didn't catch even a hint of disconnect with his character.

While Roberts' lack of experience is unnoticeable**,** Joseph Obletom's inexperience seems an advantage in his portrayal of Troy's insane brother, Gabriel. Mentioning only backstage experience in his program biography, Obletom's debut on the other side of the set is endearing in its simplicity, as the actor doesn't over-think and, consequently, overplay the troubled psychology of his character.

Personally, I would've welcomed more stage time for Renaud Haymond, who gives an amicable, mellow protrayal of Troy's best friend, Jim Bono. (I also would've liked to sit on the porch with him and swap stories. He's that enjoyable.) And Jarrell adds just enough of a physical and emotional swagger to Lyons that you're left wondering if he's actually dropping by to see his family, or merely seeking a payout. It's that ambiguity that adds notable interest to his performance.

There's not much that's wrong with Playcrafters' *Fences*, but there could be more *right* with it if - once the show officially opens - Harris portrays Troy's anger with more intensity. The supporting cast, however, already has a handle on the play's severe emotions, and should Harris match their emotional energy, the production could wind up being one of area-theatre's best of the year.

For tickets and information, call (309)764-0330 or visit Playcrafters.com .

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