

Theater

Fences

Flat-out fabulous

by Laurie Youngers

Now playing at the Alliance Mainstage is a much-hyped play by August Wilson, the playwright often described as the foremost dramatist in American theater today. The work *Fences* has won a Pulitzer, a Tony, the New York Drama Critics Award, Outer Critics Award and the American Theater Critics Award for Best Play. Can *anything* be that good? Yes — this play is flat-out fabulous. And the Alliance's production presents every richly poetic scene with loving tenderness. The cast, led by John Henry Redwood as Troy Maxson, fills the theater with joy, and reassures us that "we can make the world a better place," as director Kenny Leon says.

Not an unusual story, *Fences* is about the struggles of a family trying to understand how they fit together. Pretty common fare these days — what is *uncommon* is the way Wilson's tale, under Leon's able hand, allows us to actually see into the hearts of the Maxson family.

Troy Maxson, the father, is a Pittsburgh sanitation worker following World War II. A victim of racism, Troy was an excellent baseball player in the Negro League, but couldn't cross over to the majors when he was still young enough to play, and now he's too old. The resulting emotional injury won't heal, and it keeps Troy from allowing his son, Corey, to participate in high school sports, or even to hope for a



HANG IT UP: Carol Mitchell Leon (left) and John Henry Redwood.

college scholarship. Other relationships, all centered around Troy, are developed and put under the microscope of Wilson's fine eye for action and equally fine ear for dialogue.

The play is humorous in parts, but underlying everything is a sadness that the characters can feel, but can't understand or escape. The "fences" of the title are the fences Troy builds around his home: in his attempt to banish death from his family, he forbids life, imprisoning himself in his own desire for security.

Fences has some lovely moments of pure theatrical joy, such as when Troy relates his stories of the past. Redwood is a natural storyteller, incorporating physical action with facial expression. Other moments of the play are quite painful. Most of the pain is felt by Troy's wife, Rose, played by the admirable Carol Mitchell Leon. I won't reveal the moment of crisis, but when it occurs Leon takes over the play just as Rose takes over what happens in her family. Strong and resilient, Rose knows what she has done with her life, what she should regret and what she can keep. It's powerful stuff.

The play is humorous in parts, but underlying everything is a sadness that the characters can feel, but can't understand or escape.

Other performances by Frederick Charles Canada as Troy's side-kick, Bono, and Bill Nunn as Troy's grown son, Lyons, are excellent. Ditto the performance by Tico Wells as Troy's son, Corey, sullen and disappointed in his father. Striking for his sensitive portrayal of the badly damaged soldier, Afemo Omilami as Troy's brother Gabriel brings real life out of the shadows of a fractured mind. But citing the individual performances here is almost damaging to this effort — this cast is a unit, working and living the words as feelings and thoughts. Leon's casting is as brilliant as his direction.

The set by Michael Olich, a back yard and an alley way, is authentic and realistic, but Ann G. Wrightson's lighting is really powerful, transforming the static set from morning to evening, summer to winter. The final scene is bathed in light so pure, so golden, few words are needed. Music by composer Dwight Andrews adds just a little more depth to a play rich in meaning. □

Fences playing at the Alliance Theater, Woodruff Arts Center, 1280 Peachtree St., through Feb. 17. Call 892-2414.