

# LA STAGE

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## Laurence Fishburne & Angela Bassett

*Build Fences Together*

**FREE NIGHT OF THEATRE**

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**It is a balmy summer evening at the Pasadena Playhouse. Peals of laughter pepper the air with exclamation points. Standard punctuation perhaps for pithy theatrical quotes but these hearty explosions announce more than greasepaint hyperbole. They trumpet Gabriel's genuine delight as two earthly mortals relish the rare heavenly alignment that brought them together tonight.**

Laurence Fishburne and Angela Bassett are sitting for their first interview at the end of the first day of rehearsal on the first day of a month that bears the first name of the man responsible for the duo appearing on stage together—for the first time.

Coincidence? Or merely the metaphysical hand of Aunt Esther at work.

Perhaps August Wilson's famous conjure woman is indeed behind the whirlwind series of synchronistic events responsible for one of Hollywood's most celebrated screen couples starring in the Playhouse's revival of his Pulitzer Prize, Tony Award and Drama Desk Award winning play *Fences* directed by its Artistic Director Sheldon Epps. The production also features Bryan Clark (*His Girl Friday*), Kadeem Hardison (*A Different World*), Orlando Jones (*Drumline*), Wendell Pierce (*The Boys of Winter*) and Victoria Matthews (*Les Misérables*).

After all, it was Epps who approached Bassett in May with the idea of playing Rose, the wife of former Negro League baseball star turned garbage collector Troy Maxson, knowing it was a one in a million chance. Bassett and husband Courtney Vance, who had originated the role of Troy and Rose's son Cory in the famed Broadway production, had recently become the parents of twins.

What Epps didn't know at the time was that Fishburne had suggested the idea to her a month earlier during a special screening in Sacramento for Governor Schwarzenegger of their new film *Akeelah and the Bee*. *Akeelah* marked the ending of a 14 year hiatus for the duo following their acclaimed 1992 Oscar nominated performances as Ike and Tina Turner in *What's Love Got to Do With It?* and their screen couple debut the previous year in *Boyz in the Hood*. The experience rekindled their desire to act together and on stage.

"After *Akeelah*, it was very evident we both wanted to work with each other again," admits Fishburne, "especially on some material we could really sink our teeth into like..."

"Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," interjects Bassett, in a manner reminiscent of long term couples jointly telling a story.

"A Raisin in the Sun, Cat, Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf," he continues without breaking his rhythm. "And I actually offhandedly said, 'We should get together in a couple of years and do *Fences*.'"

"And I said, ah!" says Bassett with a dramatic inhale. "That's interesting. Of course, I'm remembering James Earl Jones and Mary Alice, and Courtney—who has been pushing for Laurence and me to work together. He thinks it's a brilliant idea."

"Yeah, in a couple years, when the babies are bigger," adds Fishburne smiling.

"And we'll be the right ages," says Bassett. "Then a month later, Sheldon faxes me this letter that he had the rights to *Fences*. And I went, oooh!" She makes her eyes wide as Fishburne laughs. "Which is how you get when you get a little frightened. It's an excitement because it's something you dare to hope for and desire."

"So with Laurence and I speaking together and this fax coming a month later, I thought the stars had aligned in the heavens. And it was meant to be."

But Fishburne was just about to step on stage in Alfred Uhry's *Without Walls* at the Taper beginning in June. Why would he want to jump from one play into another? Bassett convinced a skeptical Epps that the answer would be yes, and after several visits to the Taper to discuss the possibility, Fishburne agreed to make it happen.

"There was no way not to say yes," he admits. "Ultimately it was an opportunity to do the thing that has been in my heart since we worked with each other two years ago. Our history is 20 plus years you know and we haven't played live together. The first time I saw Angela on stage was in *Joe Turner*. And she came to see something I did. I think it was *Urban Blight*."

"Sheldon also just seemed to be divinely placed as the right man. I mean his spirit, his intelligence and his history with the Playhouse. For an American actor to play the Pasadena Playhouse is a significant thing."

#### A deep wilson history

**ANY JOINT STAGE DEBUT** by Fishburne and Bassett would merit heralding as a theatrical event. What makes this production of *Fences* a singular experience is its opportunity to witness two gifted artists whose legacies are uniquely connected to each other, the playwright and the creative birth of several of his plays.





# Laurence Fishburne & Angela Bassett

Heirs to an August Wilson Legacy

By Deborah Behrens    Photos by Gabriel Goldberg





**“we didn’t start out to intentionally try to have this legacy. it just happened. in a theatrical sense, i’m married to the man!”** —ANGELA BASSETT

Both actors have deeply personal and professional histories with Wilson and the man who discovered, coached and mentored him—famed stage director Lloyd Richards. His recent death at 87 in July brought to an end the trio of men responsible for Wilson’s historic cycle of 10 plays: producer Benjamin Mordecai in May 2005 at age 60 and Wilson himself last October, also at 60.

“I think what’s interesting and what’s on our side is our history with August and Lloyd,” says Fishburne. “We both have history with these men and thus the world that August created in the cycle of plays.”

“I feel we’re a part of a company,” concurs Bassett.

“We have the great good fortune to have that solid foundation from which to build our careers as actors,” adds Fishburne. “We’ve maintained a kind of integrity that I think is partly because of what we’ve gotten from Lloyd, what we naturally

come with ourselves and the connection we have to the culture the plays are steeped in. Our respect for it. Our reverence for it. Our love of these people, these places, these stories. I think we are divinely placed to be playing these parts at this point in our careers.”

Bassett made her initial connection to the duo when she was selected for Richards’ 1979 inaugural class as Dean of the Yale School of Drama and Artistic Director of the Yale Repertory Theatre. At the time, he was concurrently the Artistic Director of the O’Neill Theatre Center and its Annual National Playwright’s Conference. In 1982, he chose Wilson’s play *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* from stacks of submissions for inclusion in that year’s summer workshop. It would undergo what would ultimately become Richard’s hallmark development process for all of Wilson’s subsequent plays—a Yale Rep premiere followed

by various regional productions prior to mounting a Broadway run.

Both Fishburne and Bassett have traveled the full journey of a new Wilson play, starting at Yale and ending with their Broadway debut under Richards' tutelage—Bassett in 1988 in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and Fishburne in *Two Trains Running* for which he earned the 1992 Tony Award. Fishburne subsequently did one of the first readings of *King Hedley II* at Seattle Rep and *Gem of the Ocean* at the Taper.

It is Bassett however who participated in the playwright's mythic beginnings when Richards tapped her as a student to spend that now storied 1982 summer shaping *Ma Rainey*. She remembers Wilson as being "dear and studious."

"Lloyd saw something in that poet at the time who had written this play," she recalls. "August always had his pen and yellow legal pads. He seemed awfully shy but if you talked to him about a character, he'd get excited and tell you stories. 'I got a story about a man who stole a bucket of nails.'" She laughs. "That wound up in *Gem of the Ocean*. I guess he was like Virginia Woolf, you know? A room of one's own. That writer. That profession. Having to spend so much time alone."

Through staged readings, Bassett and other actors helped Wilson transform the first play in what would become his cycle of 10.

"We performed it," she says. "We shaped it. I was Ma's gal Dussie Mae. You saw his whole world with just a script in hand. A bare stage. Folding chair. Not much of anything. But you saw that world and you knew it was special. You were just so happy to have a great play to tackle. Then to come to the second year and see *Fences* on an outdoor stage. I wasn't part of that one but to see Howard Rollins as Gabriel raise that trumpet to the heavens. It was a glorious night. We had goose bumps for a week."

Richards directed the milestone 1987 Broadway production of *Fences* that ran for 525 performances and garnered Tony Awards for him and its legendary stars James Earl Jones and Mary Alice, plus a *Theatre World* Award for Courtney Vance. Fishburne and Bassett have vivid recollections of those performers.

"I remember being up in the cheap seats and James Earl scratching his back on the tree," says Fishburne. "I remember Mary pounding him on the chest. I remember that transformation Courtney made from being Cory to Corporal Maxson who was a completely different creature. I just remember him being a striking man when

### Auditioning for August: Finding the Explosive Mix

Laurence Fishburne auditioned for Wilson mentor and director Lloyd Richards five different times before being cast in *Two Trains Running* which would earn him a Tony Award in 1992 for his portrayal of Sterling. Until then he had never met Wilson and didn't understand what Richards was after.

"When it got to *Two Trains*, I had seen *Joe Turner*. I had seen *Fences*. I had seen *Piano Lessons*. I recognized that there was a kind of style that was going on. I was just about to have my audition for *Two Trains*. I hadn't really understood the play but there was a line the character had that I did understand and once I read it, I absolutely got who this character was.

That night I was watching television and there was something on about August. Suddenly here was (Charles) Dutton from *Piano Lessons* doing his Boy Willie thing and I had this kind of epiphany. I was like, oh, that's what Lloyd wants. That's what he's looking for. He kept trying to get me there in the audition process. It was an energy quality. A kind of explosive energy. I said OK, all right, no problem. I figured out what that is.

I went to this church on Franklin and Highland. I was just about to go in and read and there was August standing in the courtyard lighting a cigarette. I went up to him and I said (*with loud, fast energy*): "Hey, man how are you doing? Listen, you know what? I've been auditioning for your plays for about five years and I didn't understand what you guys were looking for but I got it. I'll see you later."

Then I went in and auditioned and I got the gig. And August was sort of like, what? But it's exactly the kind of thing that Sterling would have done.

he came on wearing that uniform and being taken by that."

"I remember the audience enraptured with what was going on onstage," recalls Bassett. "It was a kind of church in there. It was sacred. If you thought you wanted to be an actor, you could catch the fever in that theatre with that show. So many people caught a fever. They haven't gotten over it yet seeing those performances."

"I auditioned for the part of Lyons," Fishburne admits. "I auditioned for Lloyd five times before I got a gig. But it was weird. I'd never meet August. I'd go in these rooms and Lloyd would be there. He'd tell me something but I didn't get what he was after. He had no way of articulating it for me.

**"I think we are divinely placed to be playing these parts at this point in our careers."**

—LAURENCE FISHBURNE





He played his cards really close to the vest."

Bassett agrees. "Lloyd didn't tell you things straight. He didn't tell you what to do. He never told August. If there was something, he'd say, 'August, there's one scene too many.' He wouldn't tell you this scene has to go or this part. He tried not to squash your creative impulse."

Both actors believe that what Richards and Wilson created together was very special. According to them, neither man could have done it without the other.

"It was such a gift," says Fishburne. "I remember seeing August's plays as a young person before I realized what the connection was between him and Lloyd. I didn't even know that Lloyd was a founding member of the Negro Ensemble Theatre and I started out at NEC when I was 14. Once I realized who he was, I said wow this is great. As long as August keeps writing plays, I'll have work to do when I'm 50 or 60."

#### A Legacy as creative partners

WHILE FISHBURNE AND BASSETT may be wedded to other people, they exhibit a level of intimacy honed together over two decades as part time screen partners and full time off camera friends. They clearly celebrate one another, alternating between playful kidding, tender acknowledgement and genuine pride regarding the journeys taken as a team and separately as individuals. Both appear grateful for this latest opportunity to mine the creative depths with each other.

"We have this history as actors together that's crazy," admits Fishburne. "I think it is only similar to James Earl and Cicely Tyson who worked together from the early '60s in *The Blacks* at the Negro Ensemble Company. They played lovers in that piece. All the way up through the other things they did with each other on film. So we're really lucky and blessed to have a kind of creative partnership we've sustained all these years."

"We didn't start out to intentionally try to have this legacy," admits Bassett. "It just happened. In a theatrical sense, I'm married to the man!" She laughs, turning to Fishburne.

"Thank you," he replies, smiling at her and taking her hand. "I know that I love Angela. I've loved Angela since I first saw her onstage." He turns to look in her eyes and says, "I love you."

Bassett is visibly touched. "Thank you. I love you, too."

"I know that it's beyond explanation the stuff that happens between us when we work together," he admits. "The word I use is freedom. There's a kind of freedom that I experience. We're free with each other. There's nothing we can't do. There's no place we can't go. There's no boundary we can't

#### **Fences:** Elevating Black Life Into Art

In a 1999 *Paris Review* interview, August Wilson said he thought his plays offered "white Americans a different way to look at black Americans. For instance, in *Fences* they see a garbage man, a person they don't really look at although they see a garbage man every day. By looking at Troy's life, white people find out the content of this black garbage man's life is affected by the same things—love, honor, beauty, betrayal, duty. Recognizing these things are as much a part of his life as theirs can affect how they think about and deal with black people in their lives.

"Blacks see the content of their lives elevated into art. They don't always know that it is possible and it's important for them to know that."

For Angela Bassett, to see *Fences* or any theatre elevating black life to art "is a clarion call about our humanity. It's about living this life and looking at someone other than one who looks like you and your family. Opening up and sensing and seeing and accepting the humanity of someone who doesn't look like you but who is as deeply human.

"That's what I felt when I saw *Fences*. I saw a reflection of me, who I am, the history of my people in America. The things we've had to go through in various decades. Years of slavery to Jim Crow to segregation—on and on and on. That is what he's dealing with over the canon of these 10 plays.

"But I also saw an audience of all kinds of people—black, white and every color in between—who saw a reflection of me but also saw a reflection of themselves in someone who looked like me. And that was the beauty and the power of theatre and of August Wilson and Lloyd Richards."

push. It's completely safe."

"I feel I can make a fool out of myself with him," she laughs. "And it's OK. You know?"

"The other thing that I think is really, really precious is the fact we were both touched, taught, schooled, educated, brought along, lifted up by August and Lloyd," he adds. "It gives us wings to fly."

Bassett suddenly turns to Fishburne and says softly, "Lloyd knew we were going to do this. Courtney went to see him in the hospital and told him we were going to do this together."

Fishburne is surprised. "He did?"

She nods. "He was very pleased."

"I bet he smiled," he says.

"He did," she replies and laughs. "Yeah!" Fishburne joins her, both appreciating the divine timing of Richards' final acknowledgment. Or Aunt Esther's magic. ■

#### FENCES

Opens Sept. 1  
Plays Tues.-Fri., 8 pm  
One Weds. 2 pm  
Sat., 5 and 9 pm  
Sun. 2 and 7 pm  
Ends Oct. 1  
Tickets: \$38-\$60  
Pasadena Playhouse  
39 South El Molino Ave.,  
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