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August Wilson's *Fences* Banned in Rockford, IL Schools

All is not well in the land of *Fences*, despite its Tony Award wins in June.

A public school canceled a production of August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize winner because a white student felt excluded from auditioning at Auburn High School in Rockford, Illinois, about 85 miles northwest of Chicago.

How could this happen? A newsletter was sent to parents, stating that an all-black cast was "required." A white student's parents objected. So the play was scratched before any auditions were even held. Neither the student's name nor the parents' names were made public, a confidentiality usually reserved for sexual assault victims and under-age criminal defendants.

Teachers involved with the Drama Department said that after the objecting student graduated, the play would be produced. This was in March of 2006, over 4 years ago. That student is long gone. But the show has yet to go on. The figurative fences put up are still there, a reminder of poet Robert Frost's "Mending Wall," which asks if "good fences make good neighbors"?

How white does one have to be, to be considered a white actor for purposes of racial fairness? Academy Award winner Halle Berry, from my hometown of Cleveland, has a white mother and a black father. Is she white or black? What about Yankee shortstop Derek Jeter? He has a white mother and black father, too. As does President Barack Obama. Then, there's golfer Tiger Woods with an Asian mother and black father. How would you classify him? It is not so black and white after all.

Fences is about a black family. Can a white portray a black and still be faithful to the playwright's intentions? James Earl Jones, the original "Troy" when the play made its debut at Chicago's Goodman Theater in 1986, wrote in his memoir *Voices and Silences* that Wilson's vision of Rose, Troy's wife, was that of a woman so light-skinned she could pass for white. Why not have a white student playing a black so light she could pass for white?

Desperate Housewives' Felicity Huffman was nominated for an Oscar as a woman playing a man trying to become a woman in *Transamerica*. We live in an age where anything is possible, limited only by one's imagination or lack of it.

This May 4th, I went to see the *Fences* revival at Broadway's Cort Theatre with Denzel Washington and Viola Davis. It was the day the Tony nominations were announced, and also the 40th anniversary of the Kent State shootings. I had seen James Earl Jones and Mary Alice opening night at the Goodman 24 years earlier and attended the cast party afterwards.

I remember how shy Jones was at the party, sitting on a three-legged stool very low to the floor. He didn't say a word. Quite a contrast with his stern demeanor and booming voice on stage. His portrayal was more authoritarian than Washington's. Denzel was more playful in the role and showed a greater sense of humor, while Viola Davis came across as the taskmaster compared with Mary Alice's meeker version as Jones' Rose.

Seeing *Fences* again, I was inspired with this thought. What if Troy's love child were played by a young actress of another race instead of an African-American? That would give an added dimension and subtext, wouldn't it?

But getting back to the brouhaha at Auburn High School, what is wrong with an all-black cast? There have been all-white casts for years and still are. The stage manager for Auburn's *Fences* was to be a white female. One of the play's co-directors was a white male. Whites would have been on the tech crews. Whites were not being excluded from the production. Didn't Steven Spielberg start behind the scenes? Look where he ended up.

There is an opportunity for a teaching moment here. Auburn High School is in one of the top three largest school districts in Illinois. As an educational institution, race issues need to be discussed, not swept under the rug. Education is about entertaining competing viewpoints. Vigorous debate. The give-and-take of ideas.

Heck, if the school system plays its cards right, maybe some of the cast from the Broadway revival, which closes July 11th, would come to speak at Auburn High School when school begins in late August. You never know.

After all, the curtain comes down with the metaphor of the angel Gabriel opening up the gates of heaven as Viola Davis pointed out in accepting her Tony. Quoting from 1 Corinthians 2:9-10, Davis said of herself: "I was born in circumstances where my eyes could not see it; my hands could not touch it; so my heart had to believe it." Echoed by her co-star Denzel Washington in accepting his Tony, "My mother always says, 'Man gives the award; God gives the reward.'"

Broadway's *Fences* just won the Tony for "Best Revival of a Play." Hey, Rockford, revive *Fences* with new Schools Superintendent LaVonne Sheffield. What a great way to jump start a new school year!

Lonna Saunders is an Illinois attorney with a special interest in First Amendment rights. As Chair of the Law & Media Committee of the American Bar Association, Saunders put together a seminar on non-traditional casting at NYU Law School on June 15, 1992. Speakers included The Shubert Organization's Chairman Gerald Schoenfeld; Dick Cavett; Gregory Mosher (Director, "A Streetcar Named Desire"/Jessica Lange, Alec Baldwin); Frederick Zollo (Producer, "Death & the Maiden"/Richard Dreyfuss, Glenn Close, Gene Hackman); Peter Stone ("Will Rogers' Follies"); Tonya Pinkins (Actor, "Jelly's Last Jam" & "All My Children"); Richard Jay-Alexander (Director, "Miss Saigon"); Charles Busch ("Vampire Lesbians of Sodom"); and Kitty Lunn (Actor, NBC-TV's "Days of Our Lives").