

with ethereal backup vocals, more effectively convey period authenticity.

Like its revival, *Promises, Promises* was conceived at a time of nostalgic ambivalence. Near the beginning of the show, Chuck vows: "I want a lot / And I know I'll get it all / Just like someone who's twice as big as life." A quintessential Broadway anthem of ambition, the Algeresque song is a throwback to older musicals, which are often set in the idealized "wonderful town" of New York City and feature underdogs who make good through pluck and perseverance. Yet in the American musical of the late 1960s, when dark-edged "concept musicals" like *Cabaret* revolutionized the form, the rags-to-riches story lost its optimistic luster. In the age of the Vietnam War, cynicism about institutions, ranging from politics to marriage, transformed Broadway. *Promises, Promises* is a stylistic hybrid: its dramaturgy is steeped in older forms of musical comedy, but its caustic content resonates with the concept musical.

Preserving this formal tension, Ashford balances *Promises, Promises'* nostalgic and comic impulses with a recession-era vision of the corporate world. In part, he accomplishes this through Scott Pask's brilliant mise en scène. While the Consolidated Life office and New York City nightspots are represented with boldly streamlined stylization, the only realistically detailed space is the interior of Chuck's apartment. Here, Pask suggests the contrasting moral dimensions of the private and public spheres. The designer has also liberally borrowed from the aesthetics of the period, including Abstract Expressionism, with geometric mobiles and Henry Moore-esque sculptures adorning the office. Evoking the neon excitement of Big Apple success, Pask simultaneously suggests its undercurrents of hollowness and sterility.

Choreography and casting also play a part in *Promises, Promises'* tonal chiaroscuro. If Ashford's choreography lacks the galvanic verve of Michael Bennett's original, it wittily conveys the tension between banality and libido, conformity and individualist aspiration. In the opening number, Chuck imagines his deskbound co-workers twirling and swiveling around him, soaring from the mundane into a realm of MGM musical fantasy. At the Grapes of Roth nightclub, singles dance in a robotic mating ritual. Chenoweth and Hayes generate performance chemistry through their clashing styles. Although somewhat miscast as the fragile Fran, Chenoweth admirably plays down her dynamo star persona. By contrast, the excellent Hayes and Katie Finneran (as Chuck's barroom "pick-up" Marge) preserve the raucous musical-comedy side of *Promises, Promises*. Balanced against the musical's cynical content are

confectionary production numbers like "Turkey Lurkey Time."

With his eclectic yet focused staging of *Promises, Promises*, Ashford mostly avoids nostalgic complacency. It remains to be seen if Ashford will do the same in March 2011, when he revisits the corporate 1960s with a new Broadway production of *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. *Promises, Promises* is not only a revival of a musical, but also the uneasy evocation of an American myth: the prospect of becoming "twice as big as life" in the business world. *Promises, Promises*, like *Mad Men*, is ambivalent about such success stories, even as the show business of Broadway never finishes telling them.

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FENCES. By August Wilson. Directed by Kenny Leon. Cort Theatre, New York City. 18 April 2010.

August Wilson premiered *Fences* at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1985 with the hope of answering those admirers and critics who, while charmed by the poet-cum-playwright's dramatic turns with *Jitney* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, longed for more sophisticated character development and skillful plotting. Directed by Lloyd Richards and vivified by actors James Earl Jones and Mary Alice in the central roles of Troy and Rose Maxson, *Fences* proved a demonstrative rejoinder to Wilson's critics. Indeed, the play elicited praise for Wilson's nuanced rendering of black domestic life in the US before the civil rights movement that at once repeated, revised, and riffed on key moments and movements in African American history. *Fences* subsequently moved to Broadway in 1987, which brought additional acclaim, including the Tony Award for Best Play, the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, and recognition for Wilson as one of the finest playwrights making and remaking myths for the contemporary theatre.

More than two decades after its New York premier, a long-overdue revival of *Fences* arrived on Broadway in a limited engagement at the Cort Theatre. Directed by Kenny Leon, a frequent interpreter of Wilson's texts, this new production of *Fences* affirmed both the timelessness and timeliness of the play. Leon's production simultaneously foregrounded Wilson's poetic language, beautifully drawn characters, and exacting dramaturgy, while exploiting and resisting the sentimentality that, at times, arrests the text. Countering the cynicism so



Denzel Washington (Troy Maxson) and Viola Davis (Rose Maxson) in *Fences*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)



Stephen McKinley Henderson (Jim Bono) and Denzel Washington (Troy Maxson) in *Fences*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

prevalent in our contemporary moment, Leon's production accentuated the play's tonalities of forgiveness, redemption, and renewal. In so doing, it reinvigorated for its contemporary audience the critical importance of attending to unfinished business from the past. Leon's reverential, affirmative approach, to be sure, gave *Fences* an immediacy that resonated powerfully in the present.

Undoubtedly, performances by Denzel Washington (Troy) and Viola Davis (Rose) significantly boosted the potency of the revival. In *Troy*, Wilson crafts a formidable, but also contradictory figure. Washington coupled charm and the megawatt smile that he has used so effectively in his films with an assured sense of hubris, thereby making Troy both appealing and appalling. He negotiated the character's multiple identities—loyal friend, doting husband, intimidating patriarch, and unapologetic philanderer—with ease and dexterity. This virtuosic movement imbued Troy with a psychological weight that shifted the entire production beyond a purely emotional key. Indeed, Washington's sharp performance eloquently revealed Troy's constant battles against the pull of death and self-destruction, which, in turn, motivated his drive to live and create art (manifested in storytelling). Troy's survival depends on these creative acts. His relationship to Rose, in fact, hinges on his imaginative retellings of past events and her emending the most egregious embellishments. Washington's ability to sustain this dynamic throughout the performance gave new life to the themes so central to Wilson's dramaturgy: namely, honoring the inextricable relationship of the past to the present, of forgiveness to revitalization, and, strikingly, of loss to creativity.

Washington, of course, had an equally skilled scene partner in Davis. A veteran of several productions of Wilson's plays, including her Tony Award-

winning performance as Tonya in 2001's *King Hedley II*, Davis's rendering of Rose was as joyful as it was soulful. She filled the character with an unwavering sense of dignity and agency that highlighted anew Rose's strength and grace—her multidimensionality. This perhaps resonated most profoundly in the revival during the play's final scene. Recounting for Corey the life she wanted for herself and for her family, Davis's Rose spoke not with regret or disappointment, but instead with excitement about the possibilities of living fully and freely for the first time. In that moment, Rose clearly forgave Troy and, in so doing, embraced a new way of knowing and being in the world; indeed, it became clear that she had accepted, welcomed even, the responsibility to make a life of her own in the aftermath of loss.

On the whole, Leon explored every beat of Wilson's text. Accordingly, the revival's entire ensemble delivered superb performances, most notably, Stephen McKinley Henderson as the even-tempered, deeply philosophical Bono and Mykelti Williamson as the instinctively compassionate Gabriel. Leon's efficient staging unfolded against Santo Loquasto's design for the Maxson's worn but loved red-brick home. Interestingly, Loquasto placed a giant tree at the center of his design. The tree not only threatened to overwhelm the Maxson's modest house, but also signified and concretized crucial themes of forgiveness, redemption, and renewal that Wilson investigates throughout *Fences* (and, more broadly, his *Pittsburgh Cycle*).

The force of Wilson's reply in *Fences*, in fact, became most salient and profound in the revival (and in the present) when the production explicitly accentuated these themes. In those moments, Leon's elegant staging fittingly commemorated Wilson, a playwright who, like Troy, achieved and continues to find new life through his creative acts of storytelling and remaking history.

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CÉDRIC ANDRIEUX. By Cédric Andrieux. Choreographed by Jérôme Bel. Impulstanz Festival. Musuem Quartier Theatre Halle E. Vienna, Austria. 30 July 2010.

In *Cédric Andrieux*, former Merce Cunningham dancer Cédric Andrieux humbly shared intimate details from his life in dance, taking time between revealing, autobiographic narrations to perform exquisite choreographic moments from his career. It is rare that a dancer with such a prolific career