

“Fences” and “Hidden Figures”: Finding Purpose in Unexpected Places

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Two recent films, each nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture, help white America understand the challenges and struggles of black America from different perspectives. On the one hand, “[Fences](#)” is a story that shines a light on the challenges and issues faced by black families in the 1950s. On the other hand, in “[Hidden Figures](#),” we have Hollywood telling the amazing story of three immensely talented black women who made invaluable contributions to NASA and the American space program.

[August Wilson](#) has been called one of the finest American playwrights of the 20th century. His plays have highlighted and brought to life African Americans in everyday roles dealing with everyday issues including love, struggle, duty, and betrayal. The impetus behind his plays was so white Americans could begin to see African Americans in a different light; see them dealing with the same issues that define life for most whites so that whites just might treat African Americans differently. “Fences” was one of his best-known plays for which he received both a Pulitzer and a Tony award. In 2016, “Fences” came to the big screen directed by Denzel Washington.

“Fences” is the story of Troy Maxson, a sanitation worker in 1950s Pittsburgh. Portrayed passionately by Denzel Washington, Maxson is a bitter man whose dream of becoming a professional baseball player died early on because he was too old by the time Major League Baseball began admitting black players. As a result, after spending time in prison, he now struggles with his own ambitions to find success in his job and as a man needing to feel vibrant and loved. Yet, he looks for this, as the proverbial song says, “in all the wrong places.”



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His main support is his long-suffering wife, Rose, played brilliantly by Viola Davis, who won the 2010 Tony for best actress in the role and the 2017 Oscar for Best Supporting Actress for the same role (her Oscar [acceptance speech](#) was deeply moving).

Yet, Troy cannot see the obvious — how Rose has been the one not only standing by his side all those years but also the one holding the family together, trying to smooth the sometimes disjointed relationship Troy has with his two sons and his mentally challenged brother. Instead he turns secretly to another woman to satisfy his need to feel like a man again; to be loved. He works hard to convince himself that it is a harmless flirtation that doesn’t mean anything.

Troy is almost like a juggler trying to keep multiple elements of his fractured life in the air, hoping they don’t come falling down around him.

Nor can he see the love and admiration that his youngest son, Cory, has for him. A proud man who never went to school or learned to read, Troy’s main concern is that Cory have a steady job so once he graduates from high school, he has some hope for the future. But Cory has his own dreams and aspirations that conflict with his father’s. As a result, Troy manages to extinguish that love when he tries to destroy his own son’s hope for a future as a football player and mold him in Troy’s image.

It all begins to unravel when Troy finds out that he is going to be a father again – though not by his wife. Knowing he cannot hide the flirtation any longer, he confesses everything to Rose. That is when we see Rose’s full emotions come spilling out. She goes head to head with her husband, reminding him that just as much as he suffered, she was right there beside him suffering as well. It is at this moment that Troy is no longer the head of the household. It subtly shifts to Rose. Rose’s ability to rise above the situation is clearly noted when his girlfriend dies in childbirth, forcing Troy to take in the baby, and Rose ends up raising the child.

“Fences” pulls at our emotions and draws us into the Maxson family dynamic. Denzel Washington allows us to see Troy Maxson with all his rough edges trying to make sense of his life. The blend of dysfunctional relationships in the movie are Wilson at his best. The movie is worth seeing to get a glimpse of the struggles that could be found in any family in the 1950s as brought to life by a gifted cast.

“Hidden Figures” is also a brilliant piece of cinematic storytelling that shines a light on the previously unknown contributions of three profound African American women to the American space program and

the first manned orbital flight by astronaut John Glenn in 1962. In contrast to the harshness of life as an African American family in the 1950s, “Hidden Figures” highlights the ingenuity and innovative character of Katherine Johnson, Dorothy Vaughan and Mary Jackson.



The official trailer for “Fences” (courtesy Paramount Pictures)

All were mathematicians who were undiscovered until preparations began to launch the Mercury-Atlas 6 spaceflight in which Glenn orbited the earth three times, the first American to do so. As noted by the three actresses during last month’s Oscar telecast, none of them had ever heard of these women and their tremendous heritage for not only African Americans but also African American women.

Katherine Johnson (Taraji Henson) was essential in calculating the numbers that would bring Glenn back to earth. Nicknamed the “human computer,” Johnson was responsible for calculating orbital trajectories, launch windows and emergency plans to bring Glenn home safely – something the team at NASA was not able to figure out. Dorothy Vaughan (Octavia Spencer) learned how to use the new mainframe computer system that had just been installed in NASA. At a time when few people understood the system, let alone the FORTRAN programming language, Vaughan foresaw the coming computer age and taught herself FORTRAN. But she did not stop there. Vaughan, fearing the African American staff she supervised at Langley would lose their jobs once the computers came in, trained all the women in her section in computer programming and how to run the system, making them indispensable. Mary Jackson (Janelle Monae), also a mathematician, was the first black woman to break the color barrier when she became NASA’s first black female engineer.



The official trailer for “Hidden Figures” (courtesy of 20th Century Fox)

Each of the three women worked in what was called the West Area Computing division. The people in the division had amazing math skills and performed their tasks by hand, without the aid of a computer. Johnson, Vaughan and Jackson quickly rose to the top with their extraordinary skills and willingness to speak out at a time in which black women were afraid to do so. Johnson would eventually be awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2015. Vaughan would later head the programming section of the Analysis and Computation Division at Langley. And Jackson would influence the hiring and promotion of women at NASA in science, engineering and mathematics.

“Hidden Figures” quietly and simply portrays the struggles of these three women to work in a white-dominated and male-dominated field. The film beautifully portrays how each woman, in her own right, overcame and won the respect of their co-workers both black and white.

Both films portray different challenges and struggles faced by black Americans and black American women. One could say that the real power of “Fences” is the quiet, indefatigable and determined power of Rose Maxson as the vertical force of her family. She is the one who teaches her family about the power of love, forgiveness and doing what is right. In “Hidden Figures,” the audience learns one does not always need to be the loudest voice in the room in order to be heard and who makes the greatest impact on the lives of those around them. Both films certainly deserved the Oscar nominations they received. And both certainly challenged this viewer to reflect on and to be grateful for those who have set the bar just a little higher as to how to live a meaningful life.

“Fences” (rated PG-13) is available as a digital download on iTunes, Google Play and Amazon Video, and will be released March 14 on DVD. Running time: 139 minutes. Directed by Denzel Washington; screenplay by August Wilson; main cast: Denzel Washington and Viola Davis. See IMDB for [full details](#).

“Hidden Figures” (rated PG) will be available for digital download in late March and released April 11 on DVD. Running time: 127 minutes. Directed by Theodore Melfi; screenplay by Theodore Melfi and Allison Schroeder; main cast: Taraji P. Henson, Octavia Spencer, Janelle Monáe, and Kevin Costner. See IMDB for [full details](#).

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Photo at top: Denzel Washington and Viola Davis in a scene from “Fences” (courtesy Paramount Pictures).