

# A story about the Big themes of love, injustice and fear

**THEATRE**

Lenny Henry is an entertainer that most people associate with stand-up, Comic Relief and promoting a certain budget hotel chain.

But in recent years he's carved himself out a new career as a serious - very serious - actor. He's overcome hostility from the establishment to make triumphant appearances in two Shakespeares and now he returns to Milton Keynes Theatre later this month in a powerful and hard-hitting story set against the background of racial prejudice in 1950s America.

August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize-winning *Fences* is the story of former baseball star Troy Maxon whose aspirations and dreams are destroyed because of the colour

of his skin. He tries to protect his family from racism but, in the event, alienates his son who has ambitions of his own. It's very Arthur Miller/Tennessee Williams, dealing with big issues through one family's eyes. But there's also a lot of humour as this big bear of a man strives to make a life for himself in a society that's in upheaval.

I met up with *Fences*' director Paulette Randall and Lenny as the cast rehearsed in a Brixton community centre. The drama is now on a brief tour, coming to MKT on Monday, before going to the West End.

"This is a really rather beautiful and incredibly important play," said Paulette. "By the end of it people leaving will, if nothing else, take away with them that they will never look at a big black man who might be in a dustman's uniform in

the same way. "It's a story about love, injustice, fear. Big themes."

"Troy is a typical 1950s African-American patriarch. He's the king of the castle in his own house but when he's outside he's invisible because we're in pre-Civil Rights America.

"August Wilson has written a play that is probably inspired by Miller. Maxon is a towering colossus of a wreck of a man who has a moral code but he isn't doing right by his wife and he ain't doing right by his brother or son. He wants everyone to do as he says and not do as he does. There's one rule for Troy and a different rule for everyone else.

"Troy's not a touchy feely dad. He's a difficult man. His wife Rose is a fantastic nurturing loving mum and women are going to love her. She's just like your mum.

"August Wilson throws you a bit of a curve ball. In the first half an hour you really like Troy. He's funny, charming, loves his wife etc but suddenly, as you peel more and more layers of the onion, you see that he's much more complicated than we thought at first.

"He's not some laughing and smiling black guy from the '50s. He's actually very troubled.

"They often say the best characters are the villains. There's no real challenge playing a nice bloke. I'm a nice bloke - so what? The challenge is to convince an audience that you are this multi-layered, complicated guy with problems

"The 1950s was tough. People were going around and beating people up for no reason. We had riots. I knew people who carried iron bars in their cars for protection.



"In America it was far worse. People were being lynched. The KKK was in full effect. There were cross burnings. Anyone who remembers that time will resonate with this play. "And if you're a dad and you have a son who is cheeking you all the time, or a mum and you're trying to hold a family

together, or you've got a husband who is playing away from home, or a son who is at loggerheads with his dad, you will also resonate with this play. "August Wilson is an incredibly astute observer of human relations."

*Fences* runs at MK Theatre from Monday. For tickets call 0844 871 7652. ANNE COX

## Say yes to the G&S

**OPERA**

Let the Wolverton Gilbert & Sullivan Society transport you to the Tower of London during the 16th Century with their production of *The Yeoman of the Guard* from Tuesday.

Stantonbury Campus Theatre will stage the opera - which tells the story of Colonel Fairfax, a man sentenced to death for sorcery - until Saturday March 23.

The imprisoned Colonel Fairfax hopes to thwart his accuser by marrying the first woman who will agree.

Meanwhile Fairfax's old friend, the Beefeater Sergeant Meryll, believes him innocent and plots to set Fairfax free.

Their scheming will entwine their fate with a jester, a singer, a cruel jailer and a reluctant spinster.

Contact MK 262250 for tickets.

## Within Close Distance

**DANCE**

Parlor Dance Company is on tour with *Close Distance*, and on Friday night the production will show at The Venue, Walton High.

This is a show revolving around the lives of four people, brought together simply on the basis of where they live.

"An explosive, helter-skelter ride of dance and impressive contact work, speech, animation and visual projections will grip you, tickle you, pull on your heart

strings and make you ponder on your own life," assure those behind the accomplished piece of work.

If you want to fly, tumble, laugh and cry with the four energetic performers giving their all for your entertainment, call MK 677954 for a ticket to the last night of the tour.

You'll also be supporting one of our own - for eight years, Helen has been one of the leading choreographers with MKT Raw, staged annually at MK Theatre.



## Have a laugh at the funny girls!

**COMEDY**

MK Theatre of Comedy prove gals have comedic value as well as the guys, with their new show, on stage from tonight - and through to Saturday at the

Chrysalis Theatre in Willen. *The Complete History of Comedy: Funny Women* is a chance to celebrate ladies who bring larfs: From French and Saunders to Victoria Wood and loads more: "Is

it on the trolley? Does my face look bovvered? These questions and others will be answered in fairly naughty ways which necessitate the show having a 15 rating!" says MKToC's David Lovesy. Tick-



ets are £12, go to [www.mktoc.co.uk](http://www.mktoc.co.uk) and get 'em.

## Captivating times at The Stables

**MUSIC**

Gretchen Peters brings her captivating music to Wavendon venue The Stables this evening.

The Grammy nominated singer-songwriter from Nashville calls Hello Cruel World her 'most close-to-the-bone work' so far.

Also at the little venue with the big reputation, catch MOBO winner Yolanda Brown (Fri), Dr Hook's Dennis Locorriere (Sat), and cult musical duo Bourgeois & Maurice (Sun).

Hazel O'Connor arrives on Tuesday, before King Colin's Golden Underpants amuse youngsters on Wednesday afternoon. The Paris Salon provides something for the grown-ups on Wednesday with actress Deborah Findlay - and Ensemble 360. Call MK 280800 with bookings.