

Interview with Melanye Finister

On October 23, 2017, I sat down with actor Melanye Finister at People's Light and Theater Company in Malvern, PA, to talk about August Wilson's plays. Melanye appeared in PLTC performances of "Seven Guitars" (as Louise) and "Fences" (as Rose), performances which set me on the journey of writing about Wilson's life for young people. Here are excerpts from our interview:

Jen: When and where was your first experience with an August Wilson play?

Melanye: I'd heard about Jitney! because that play was developing in Pittsburgh around the time when I was in school there (at Carnegie Mellon University)—but I didn't get to see the production. My first real experience with an August Wilson play was on Broadway when I saw Joe Turner's Come and Gone. I remember the whole thing being so different from anything I'd ever seen before—so profound. Everything about it—the characters, the script, the staging—was just larger than life and seemed to come right to me, you know?

Jen: Do you remember who was in it?

Melanye: The lead was Delroy Lindo—and he and everyone else on that stage just loomed so large . . . it was such an emotional, to the gut, profound performance. After that, I tried to see August Wilson's plays wherever and whenever I could.

Jen: What did you see after that first one and how did it affect you?

Melanye: I also saw The Piano Lesson on Broadway in New York and later I saw Two Trains Running in Baltimore. In The Piano Lesson, Charles Dutton was Boy Willie and I remember he was just like a ping-pong ball, bouncing all over that stage! This was new to me because I was trained in a more naturalistic kind of acting, where you try not to do anything that would make your audience think they were outside of reality. But this Boy Willie character, he didn't care about that! And his hyper-activity and impulsiveness was balanced by Sister's (Berniece's) more controlled, steadier character. But she was just as powerful, maybe more powerful, in that play. She's the voice of reason in the story.

Jen: I'm glad you mentioned her because I wanted to ask you specifically about the women in Wilson's plays. You played Louise in this theater's (PLTC) production of *Seven Guitars*. It was seeing that play that first got me hooked on Wilson's work and curious about his own life story. So—how did you feel about that play and, in particular, your role in that play? (and also, please tell us about your role as Rose in PLTC's *Fences* a few years later.)

Melanye: Well, after seeing those high-energy performances of Wilson's work elsewhere and being so moved by those characters and those stories—really profound, spiritual stories about the black community—I was a little intimidated, really, to embody one of his (Wilson's) characters. But you know, once you're in it, you just DO it and I did enjoy Louise . . . she's funny and she's full of life; a real force and I love that about her! And so is Rose in Fences—a real force, a real grounding force in that story. I think in our production here, which was directed by a woman (Jade King Carroll), I was able to bring out the *joy* in Rose's character—how she could be playful with Troy and really love him, despite his insecurities, his faults and his betrayals. I feel like *Fences* is really Rose's story . . . so much of the time when it's done, it's done as Troy's story, but when you think about it, it's Rose that's there in the end and it's just as much *her* story.



Melanye Finister as “Rose” in August Wilson’s *Fences*, People’s Light & Theater Co., 2014. (Photo credit: Mark Garvin)

Jen: Can I ask what you thought about the recent film version of *Fences*?

Melanye: I found the film to be much bleaker than I felt our production here was . . . and that’s just me, and maybe that’s also the different director’s interpretation. That isn’t to say it wasn’t good—it’s just that it was, for me anyway, darker, heavier than I remember it feeling when we did it.

Jen: Well, let’s talk about actors, scripts, and direction a bit more then . . .

Melanye: Sometimes its hard to tell in a particular play or film, whether it’s the writer or the director who is influencing the way a certain character is played or a scene is being delivered to the audience. Our performances of *Fences* and of *Seven Guitars* here at People’s Light in Malvern were both directed by women, and that makes a difference. There was more room, I think, for women as actors in those productions.

Jen: This might be an unfair question, but do you have a favorite August Wilson play?

Melanye: Wow, that’s hard. I love *The Piano Lesson*. And *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*—maybe because that’s the very first one I saw and it stuck with me in such a profound way.

Jen: I believe Wilson once said that he thought *Joe Turner* was his best play . . .

Melanye: I think so. With both *The Piano Lesson* and *Joe Turner*, I felt like, when I first saw them, it helped me make a personal, spiritual connection to a sense of history and ancestry. It feels weird to say that, but it was a very tangible experience for me. I felt the language on a molecular level—I could feel myself being WITH those people in that space. Especially as an African American woman it felt very personal.
