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C/S + Section 2

James Earl Jones at Bat

By HELEN DUDAR

JUST BEFORE THE OPENING night curtain rises on "Fences" on Thursday, a voice in the corridor will call "five minutes," and James Earl Jones will make his way to the darkest corner of the stage. There, he will stand, rapt, alone, listening to the murmur of 1,300 people settling their bodies and belongings into the seats of the 46th Street Theater. What he hears, he says, will be an animal noise, a low, benign, undifferentiated rumble that reaches his ears as *hubbahubbahubbahubbahubba*. This a nightly ritual, a moment of communion with the unseen audience. The sound can bring on tears; with luck, it can evoke the emotion he wants for the first scene. At the very least it will, in his word, *settle* him before the lights go up on James Earl Jones as Troy Maxson, lover, liar, spoiler, domestic bully, trash man and faded star of the Negro Leagues, who thinks of life and death in baseball metaphors.

A commanding American actor returns to Broadway to play a faded baseball star in 'Fences.'

"Fences" is August Wilson's vision of the black family experience — and the blighted dreams — of the 50's, a few years before civil rights protests began to boil up through the country. In more than 30 years of acting, Mr. Jones has played a truckload of high and low characters ("I'm at my best as garbage men and kings"), but he said the other day that Mr. Wilson's work is the first contemporary play since his momentous 1968 success as the fighter in Howard Sackler's play, "The Great White Hope," that draws on the depths of energy and emotion he is prepared to invest in a performance.

"Troy is supposed to jostle you, frighten you and maybe even depress you," Mr. Jones said. "He ravages, partly because of his appetite, partly because he cannot separate his principles from his prejudices. He's a highly principled man, but some of those principles are based on prejudices. He's illiterate with a great deal to say. He wounds and bruises his kin. As an actor, I love him, just as I loved Jack Jefferson in 'Great White Hope.' "

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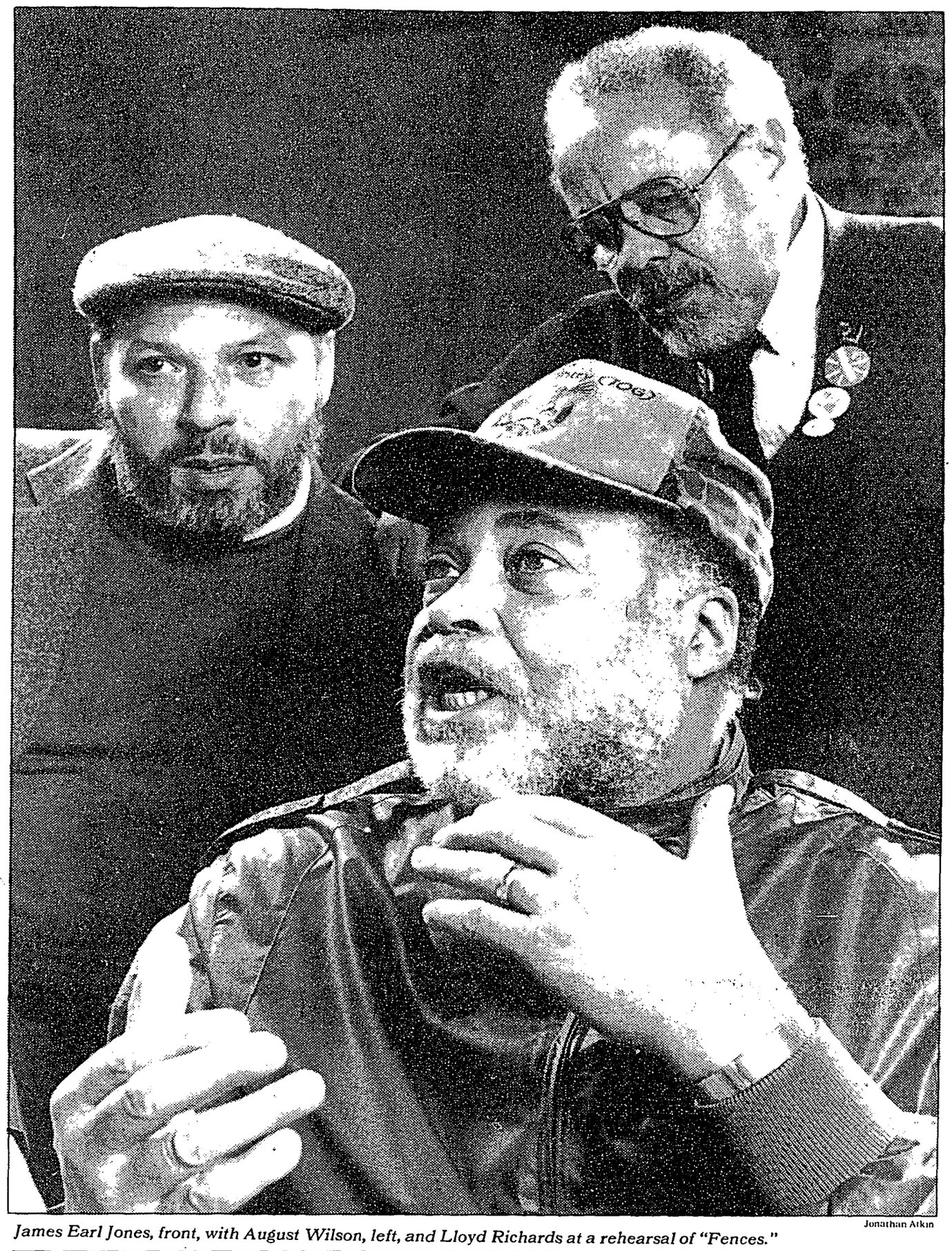
The flawed, doomed hero of "The Great White Hope" was Mr. Jones's signal opportunity to use a powerful range of gifts, and he seized it. The show not only made him a star, it established him as America's premier black actor, a status yet to be challenged. His great variety of roles have ranged from Lopahin in "The Cherry Orchard" through a small parade of Shakespearean characters to the Alex Haley of the television mini-series "Roots," to the slow-witted Lennie in "Of Mice and Men." There have been times when Mr. Jones was the transforming principle of a night of theater. In the 1980 Broadway production of Athol Fugard's "A Lesson in Aloes," the moment he came on stage in the second act of the play, a quiet stream became a torrent of exploding water.

In Troy, Mr. Jones has a role shaped to his talents as lovingly as a master tailor cuts a bespoke overcoat. Four years ago, midway into a first draft of "Fences," Mr. Wilson was writing an impassioned speech for Troy, one that required "a magnificent presence," and suddenly began hearing James Earl Jones sound the words. A resident of St. Paul, and a relative newcomer to New York theater, he knew only Mr. Jones's film and TV work, but from that point on, the voice and image of the actor dominated his drama. The speech was cut from the performing version; it didn't work out, but the actor did.



Jonathan Atkin

James Earl Jones, front, with August Wilson, left, and Lloyd Richards at a rehearsal of "Fences."

This is Mr. Wilson's second outing on Broadway. His first, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," took the New York Drama Critics Award for the 1984-85 season. Like "Ma Rainey," "Fences," with Mr. Jones, was first brought to life at the hands of Lloyd Richards at the Yale Repertory Theater, where he is the artistic director. That was nearly two years ago. Most of the original cast played a short run last year in Chicago, where Carol Shorenstein Hays saw it and decided to finance her first independent Broadway production. Mrs. Hays, who owns three theaters in San Francisco, took the play to her home territory for a month before the New York opening.

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A few days after the company's return, Mr. Jones, back home in Pawling, N.Y., with his family, came to town in casual exurban gear: black jersey shirt, bright red suspenders attached to nondescript trousers and an Army fatigue cap, souvenir of last summer's filming of "Gardens of Stone," a Francis Coppola movie scheduled for release in the fall. In his producer's diminutive Times Square office there was hardly space for a large actor to make an expansive gesture.

Mr. Jones is 56. Steel gray has attacked his sideburns, and the beard he wore until recently, and an enthusiastic appetite has rounded his jowls and betrayed his belly. The deep, supple voice is still an instrument of power and beauty, and the pale, greenish eyes are instant barometers to his mood. They turn wary when he thinks he is about to hear a question about his pri-

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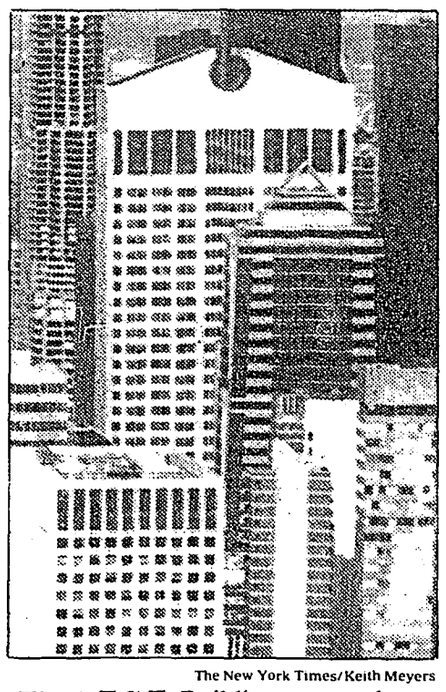
Creeping Gigantism in Manhattan

By ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

WHAT IS NEW AND NOTAble in New York City's unprecedented building boom is that all previous legal, moral and esthetic restraints have been thrown to the winds, or more accurately, to the developers, in grateful consideration of contributions to the tax base and the political purse. It is as if conflict of interest were a quaint, outmoded idea. One of the facts of New York life is that there is a symbiotic relationship between City Hall and the skyline.

Architecture, whatever it is, can hardly be ignored. For better or worse, it alters the appearance, quality, style and spirit of the city, to say nothing of its substance, services and uses, particularly when it comes in phalanxes of megabuildings. Architecture has never been more conspicuous, or less related to the urban condition. The more it shows, the less it seems to count.

This reorientation of priorities has created a climate in which zoning controls developed and tested over 70 years no longer have credibility or support; their exploitation is active policy. The city is wide open. Greed has never been so chic. The public interest has never been so passé. But it is not just building size and scale that are changing radically; we are also seeing the recasting of New York's skyscraper style. In the last five years a new kind of developer has been remaking the city with something called the "signature building," a postmodernist phenomenon that combines marketing and consumerism in a way that would have baffled Bernini but is thoroughly understood by the modern entrepreneur. (Bernini knew a lot more about making cities great rather than just gargantuan.)



The New York Times/Keith Meyers

The A.T.&T. Building—art and style alone do not measure success.

A.T.&T. the Ma Building of them all — stolid, shapeless, expensively dressed (good materials, bad cut) — has plenty of postmodern company now. The thrill is gone with the novelty. Philip Johnson and John Burgee's inflated and simplistic references to history misfire from dank ground floor galleria to much-publicized Chippendale top. The building flaunts — if such a frisky word applies — its egregious contempt for the street.

A.T.&T.'s neighbor, the eqully outsize I.B.M. Building, by Edward Larrabee Barnes and Associates, has no right to be any better, but it is. The sliced volume and polished surfaces make gestures to site and sky and the city's suave 20th-century style that the other building does not, while the angled plan accommodates a winter garden which, with a public art gallery, adds conspicuous amenities. The two buildings offer stunning proof that art and style alone are a ludicrous measure of successful urban architecture; what kind of "art" assassinates a city?

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In the corporate-headquarters marathon, A.T.&T. and I.B.M. have been followed by the Equitable complex, which joins a new building by Edward Larrabee Barnes to an older structure to fill the entire block from 52d to 53d Streets between Seventh and the Avenue of the Americas. As real estate, this is a shrewd investment in the future of the midtown West Side. As architecture, Equitable falls squarely between modernism and postmodernism, in every sense of the word. Barnes, an accomplished modernist known for his precise and elegant forms and details, could hardly be expected to dance to a postmodernist tune. What could result but an elephantine shuffle?

The building is a huge mixed bag of art and architecture, of good intentions and failed results. A mammoth vaulted top floor has an indeterminate gigantism made considerably more unsettling by in-

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