

In great company

Lenny Henry tells Kiran Sidhu about serious acting at Richmond Theatre

Lenny Henry will be treading the boards of Richmond Theatre when he takes the lead role here of *Troy* in August Wilson's African-American play, *Fences*. Henry is genuinely excited about playing Troy, telling me: 'Like all great central characters, you peel away the layers during the course of the play and you realise that this character that you're having a laugh with a half-hour ago is like – woah! It's a bit like being on a rollercoaster. He really is a piece of work.'

Let us set the scene. It's Pittsburgh in the 1950s: Troy is a bin man who used to play for the Negro baseball league. When it comes to integration in the league, he's too old to go, which makes him bitter. In 1957 his son is recruited to play baseball by a college team, and Troy's experience of racism in the league make him reluctant to let him go. And Henry cannot stop enthusing about his character saying: 'He has real moral sense. He tells his son to look after his family, that it's his responsibility. But he's out drinking and doing all sorts of things with wild women. But Troy's not listening to himself, and if he did, he'd be a much better person.' Henry says this as though he's talking about a real person, a friend, regretfully, as if to say: 'If only he would change.'

Even though in recent years Henry has acted in such plays as *Othello*, where he received rave reviews, and *The Comedy of Errors*, he is still famous for being the funny man who created outlandish characters such as Delbert Wilkins and who graced our screens every Red Nose Day. Although he hasn't turned his back on comedy, Henry has found comfort in his more recent theatre roles. He likes the fact that he has a theatre family where they make cups of tea for each other, where someone comes and runs through lines with you. 'Usually I'm on my own in my pants eating cheese and Wotsits so it's great to have company!'

I ask Henry if he has found it challenging to work within the confinements of an already established role, within a director's own vision. 'What's great about acting is that when the script arrives, everybody's already agreed that it's good.'



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You haven't got that doubt of whether it's funny or not. When you do comedy there's always a moment when you think, "I hope they think it's funny" – in a way the audience writes the script for you, they clap and laugh at what they find funny. So if someone offers you *Othello*, you don't have to worry about whether it's going to be OK! You

don't have to worry about the text, all you have to worry about is your interpretation and how you're going to tell the story. So when I make my own comedy, the audience writes the show, but when a great author like Arthur Miller or Shakespeare has written the play, you just climb in and hang on for the ride.'

Though most people know Henry as the funny man, we shouldn't really be that surprised at his most recent evolution. After all, he's been evolving since his first break in 1975's *New Faces*. In the late 70s he was part of the anarchic kid's show, *Tiswas*, in the 80s he had *The Lenny Henry Show*, in the 90s he was singing backing vocals on Kate Bush's album *The Red Shoes*. In 2004 he was the voice of 'the shrunken head' in a Harry Potter film and in 2007 he graduated with an English Literature degree from Open University. With each decade, Henry has evolved, or at least revealed to us a new talent.

With the resurgence of talent shows and his own success story on *New Faces*, would he go on a show like *Britain's Got Talent*? He's not sure. 'BGT do have comics, but they never get far. People need to be somewhere where comedy is being done. If you're on a bill where someone is balancing a hundred buckets on their chin, it's hard to be a comic, because what are you competing with? BGT is for someone who has huge balls and is willing to take a risk. And it's a big risk, because if you get three buzzes you won't be seen anymore, but the man with the goat that plays the ukulele will get the next round – not you.'

Well that's something Henry won't have to do any more, to show us that he's got talent. Welcome to Richmond: Lenny Henry, writer, comedienne, singer and serious actor. ■

Fences starring Lenny Henry is at Richmond Theatre from 5-9 March www.atgtickets.com/richmond