

**March 1 – March 27, 2011**

**Quadracci Powerhouse**

**By August Wilson**

**Milwaukee Repertory Theater Presents**

# **MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM**

*A co-production with  
Actors Theatre of Louisville*



*This study guide is researched and designed by the Education Department at Milwaukee Repertory Theater and is intended to prepare you for your visit. It contains information that will deepen your understanding and appreciation of the production. We've also included questions and activities for you to explore before and after our performance of **MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM**.*

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If you would like to schedule a classroom workshop, or if we can help in any other way, please contact

Jenny Kostreva at 414-290-5370 or  
jkostreva@milwaukeekeerep.com

Rebecca Witt at 414-290-5393 or  
rwitt@milwaukeekeerep.com

### **Study Guide Created By**

Rebecca Witt, Education Coordinator

### **With Contributions From**

Actors Theatre of Louisville Education Department

### **Edited By**

Jenny Kostreva, Education Director  
Cindy Moran, Public Relations Director

### **Weekday Matinees**

**March 16**

**March 23**

**All matinees are at 1:30 pm**

**NOTE: MA RAINEY'S  
BLACK BOTTOM contains  
adult language and content.**



# SYNOPSIS

*\*Spoiler Alert: This synopsis contains crucial plot information\**

Chicago. 1927. The blues are at their peak and America is struggling against racial inequalities. MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM opens with Irvin, Ma Rainey's manager, and Sturdyvant, a music studio owner, checking microphones before a recording session. Sturdyvant tells Irvin that he wants this session to go smoother than the previous one with Ma Rainey, a blues artist. While discussing the last record the band, Cutler, a guitar and trombone player, Slow Drag, a bass player, and Toledo, a piano player, arrives at the studio. Irvin asks where Ma Rainey is, but they don't know. Irvin goes to find her and Levee, the trumpet player, arrives.

While waiting for Ma Rainey to arrive, the band tells stories, jokes and argues about various things in their lives. During these conversations we find out that Levee, who is the youngest member of the band, is interested in having his own band and that he has his own version of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, a song they are supposed to record. After some time, Ma Rainey finally arrives, followed by Dussie Mae, Ma Rainey's companion, Sylvester, Ma Rainey's nephew and a policeman. The policeman informs Irvin that Ma Rainey is being charged for assault and battery and Irvin bribes him in order to drop the charges.

We cut back to the band room where Levee, Slow Drag and Cutler continue to talk. Toledo enters with sandwiches and Toledo compares



Costume  
Rendering for  
Levee

leftover sandwiches to African-Americans. As they begin to rehearse Levee's version of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, we go back to Ma Rainey in the studio. Ma Rainey and Dussie Mae are discussing the tour as Irvin enters. Ma Rainey asks Irvin what the band is rehearsing and Irvin informs Ma Rainey that Levee's arrangement might work well for the recording. However, Ma Rainey has none of it and informs the band that Sylvester will be recording the introduction to the song. Levee is angered that Ma Rainey doesn't want to use his version and that Sylvester will also be in the recording. Cutler tries to calm him down, but Levee just sulks until Sturdyvant enters the band room. His attitude changes completely and Cutler calls him out on it after Sturdyvant leaves. Levee defends his actions and tells the band a haunting

story about how a group of white men raped his mother and killed his father. We end Act One with Slow Drag singing "If I had my way... I would tear this old building down."

Act Two begins in the studio with the band getting ready to record the songs. Ma Rainey informs Irvin that she wants to record *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* first, but Irvin says that they are going to stick with Levee's version. Ma Rainey becomes upset and Sturdyvant and Irvin agree to try it her way. They begin and Ma Rainey asks for her

***"White folks don't understand the Blues. They hear it come out but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing because it's a way of understanding life."***

***- Ma Rainey***

Coca-Cola, which no one has. She refuses to sing until she gets her soda and sends Slow Drag to get her one. Ma Rainey and Cutler discuss Sylvester and the recording as we go back to the band room where Levee is singing. Dussie Mae enters and Levee tells her that he is



going to get his own band. Dussie Mae is intrigued by this and Levee kisses her.

We cut back to Ma Rainey and Cutler talking about music and the blues when Slow Drag and Sylvester enter with Cokes for her. They inform Irvin and Sturdyvant that they are ready to record and begin the process again. We hear her sing *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* only to find out that it hasn't been recorded because of a broken cord. Ma Rainey wants to leave but Irvin convinces her to stay for 15 minutes while they fix the problem. She agrees and the band goes back to the band room. Cutler says something to Levee about messing around with Dussie Mae, but Slow Drag says that Levee can do what he wants, even if it gets him in trouble. They continue to talk about women, music and life. Levee begins to talk about religion and blasphemies in front of everyone. Cutler is offended and punches Levee in the mouth and begins beating him until Toledo and Slow Drag pull him off. Levee pulls out a knife and begins swiping at Cutler threatening him and God.

As we begin to hear Ma Rainey sing again, we fade back to the studio and hear Irvin



Costume  
Rendering for  
Cutler

congratulate her on a successful session. She is impressed by Slow Drag and Toledo, but tells Levee that he played too many notes and she couldn't keep up with him. He argues with her and Ma Rainey gets fed up with Levee and fires him. Irvin and Sturdyvant enter to pay Ma Rainey and Sylvester and she informs Irvin that if there are any more mistakes with another session that she will find someplace else to record her songs. As she leaves with Sylvester and Dussie Mae we see the band in the band room waiting for their pay. Irvin and Sturdyvant give each of them their money and as they begin to leave, Levee asks Sturdyvant about the songs he gave him. Sturdyvant tells Levee that he will not be using them because he doesn't think that people will like the

type of music. Levee tries to convince Sturdyvant to record them, but to no avail. As the other band members try to leave quickly, Toledo accidentally steps on Levee's shoe. Levee becomes very angry with this and confronts Toledo about it. Toledo apologizes, but Levee is too angry to listen to him and loses control. Overcome by anger, disappointment and frustration he pulls out his knife and fatally stabs Toledo in the back.



The cast of MA RAINY'S BLACK BOTTOM, a co-production by Actors Theatre of Louisville and The Rep. Photo courtesy of Alan Simons.

**PRE-SHOW ACTIVITY:** The play takes place in a band room and a recording studio, sometimes simultaneously. What do you imagine the set to look like? How will the actors move from space to space easily? Draw out your ideas and share them with a small group.

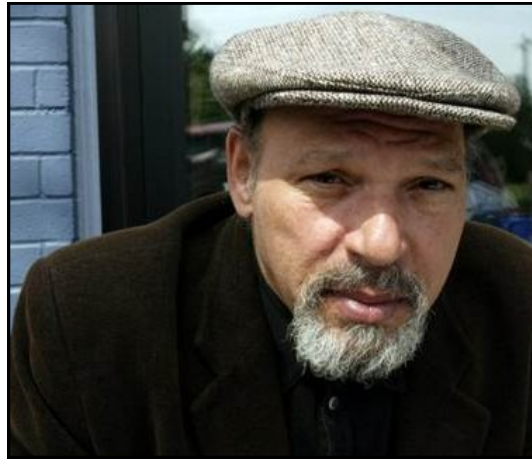
**POST-SHOW ACTIVITY:** After seeing the show, do you think the set design worked for the play? Compare and contrast what you drew to what you saw. Why do you think the designer chose to create what you saw? Discuss your answers with your class.

All costume renderings in this study guide were drawn by Lorraine Venberg, Costume Designer for MA RAINY'S BLACK BOTTOM

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

August Wilson is one of the most renowned and inspirational African-American playwrights of the 20th century. Wilson was born in Pittsburgh on April 27, 1945, the fourth of six children. His father, Frederick August Kittel, was a white baker and his mother, Daisy Wilson, was an African-American cleaning woman. Wilson grew up with his mother and siblings in Pittsburgh's Hill district, an impoverished neighborhood. The family saw very little of Frederick; Daisy divorced him and re-married. After moving to a new, white working class neighborhood in the 1950s, Wilson encountered extreme racial hostility including threats and abuse from peers at his high school and teachers accusing him of plagiarizing papers. These events caused Wilson to officially drop out of high school in 1960, when he was only a sophomore. Instead of telling his mother that he dropped out, Wilson continued to leave every morning and instead went to the local library where he read and educated himself. By the time he was 16 years old Wilson had also begun working small jobs which allowed him to meet a wide variety of people, many of whom influenced his future characters.

After realizing that he wanted to become a writer, Wilson moved out of his mother's house in 1965, found a job as a short order cook and eventually purchased his first typewriter. Wilson pursued writing for many years and in 1968 co-founded the Black Horizon Theater in his hometown with his friend Rob Penny and Wilson's first play, *RECYCLING*, was performed shortly after. During this time, Wilson also became interested in Malcolm X and the Black Power Movement. He was inspired by this movement and used much of what he learned to write his plays.



In 1978 Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota to further his career as a playwright. He began writing educational scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota and later received a fellowship for The Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis after writing *JITNEY*. It was produced by the Allegheny Repertory Theatre in

Pittsburgh in 1982. This same year, the artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theater, Lloyd Richards, discovered Wilson's *MA RAINY'S BLACK BOTTOM* among the hundreds of scripts sent to him each year. While he noticed a few structural problems, Richards found it to be a exceptional and realized that it could have only come from a gifted writer.

Richards' discovery was what launched Wilson's career as a playwright. Richards and Wilson formed a close alliance, working together for the next eight years and collaborating on four of Wilson's plays: *FENCES*, *JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE*, *THE PIANO LESSON* and *TWO TRAINS RUNNING*.

Wilson left St. Paul in 1994 and moved to Seattle to continue writing plays. While in Seattle, Wilson did little other than writing, sometimes working on plays for over 12 hours a day. Wilson also developed a relationship with the Seattle Repertory Theatre, which produced many of his plays. He continued to write until 2005, when Wilson was diagnosed with liver cancer. Wilson died October 8, 2005, but his achievements continue to open doors to other African-American playwrights. Many have been moved by his journey and his legacy lives on as theaters continue to produce his works and be inspired by his words.

# LANGUAGE IN MA RAINEY

*This article was written by Dr. Lundeana Thomas, Professor and Director of the University of Louisville's African-American Theatre program. It has been adapted and you can find the full article in the Actors Theatre of Louisville Study Guide for MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM.*

... In 1986, my friend and I mistakenly saw the play [MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM] on Broadway. While visiting New York from the University of Michigan, we were looking for a musical to see and on the marquee of the Cort Theatre, I saw *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*; so I told my friend it was a hot musical. You will understand my surprise once you see the show. After stopping for a snack, we began talking about the play. We loved the great actors in the play and aptly renamed it "The Boys in the Band"—Joe Seneca and Charles Dutton were marvelous in their performances. More importantly, we loved the story for what we learned and the reminisces of what we remembered from history and childhood experiences.

In addition to the brilliant stories, we were amused by Wilson's colorful language, which includes an over indulgence of the N-word. Moreover, while some object, I do not. Having spent some time living in Chicago, I can say it is realistic. When others feel that they should have the same right to use that word since blacks use it, I do object. There is a sacredness of respect that should be enforced. Paul Farhi writing about Laura Schlessinger in the *Washington Post's* August 18th article states, "To illustrate her claim of a racial double standard, she said that black comedians often use the N-word on TV without criticism, but the word is forbidden for white people." There is no double standard. Other ethnicities use derogatory words with each other. Moreover, if a person from another culture uses them they will be admonished or more by the other culture. I have never used those words in reference

to these groups, for I know my place is to honor and respect the intimacy utilized by other cultures as they do or should do about the N-word. Therefore, others should not use the N-word in relation to African Americans. It is sacred. Moreover, there is no difference in Niggah or Nigger. Leave it alone—you do not have the same permission as August Wilson has.

Wilson has the exceptional quality of getting, keeping and sustaining our attention. His other colorful language using curse words denotes a status hierarchy of emphasis. They are words that attract attention, engage the listeners, and many times demand a response. I remember a person saying that some blacks used curse words because their vocabulary is not as wide and they are looking for words that will have a major impact. I think Wilson has used them expressively and they are not overdone. These words do not diminish the prime objective but heighten the action of the play.

Finally, here we are in the Bible belt with a play that blasphemes God. Surely, we are in danger of Hell's fury. I think not again, it is realistic. Rather than be angry with Levee for cursing God, we should empathize with his plight. He does not know God, he cannot see or feel God because of the pain that has engulfed him. He cannot see his future or his victory because he is stuck in the ugliness or horridness of his past. Bad things can happen to good people, but good things are there if you choose to look. Levee did not know that God had already made plans for the men who had raped and killed his mother as well as injured him. If he could have believed that then maybe he would have been able to let the past go. Then he could have seen the good days ahead. Therein lies the irony of the Black Bottom. . . Believing you are on the Bottom while being black. . .

**POST-SHOW ACTIVITY:** MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM contains quite a bit of adult language including profanity as well as the use of the N-word. Why do you think August Wilson would write a play with language like this? Do you think he was trying to represent the time period correctly? Do you think he uses this colorful language for a different reason? Discuss your ideas with your class.



# THE CHARACTERS

*Character information was written by the Education Staff at Actors Theatre of Louisville.*

**Ma Rainey** Based on Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, an influential Blues singer from the 1920s. She is portrayed as an outspoken if not difficult artist who has no illusions that her white associates are only interested in her for the money. She is fiercely protective of her artistic integrity and personal interests.

**Mel Sturdyvant** Owner of the Chicago South Side recording studio where the play is set. Mel is frustrated by Ma’s behavior and is very vocal about it throughout the play. However, he knows that Ma’s music is quite popular. Despite his complaints, he puts up with her to make money.

**Irvin** Ma Rainey’s manager. Irvin acts as liaison between Mel and Ma Rainey. He tries to smooth over any problems that arise throughout the play to ensure that the record gets made.

**Cutler** Trombone and guitar player in Ma’s band. A career musician, Cutler is



*Costume Rendering for Sturdyvant*



*Costume Rendering for Toledo*

the leader of the instrumentalists. He understands that Ma Rainey has the final word and is interested in maintaining the peace in order to get the job done.

**Slow Drag** Bass player in Ma’s band. He got his name by slow dancing for hours to win a contest. A professional musician in his mid-fifties, he has worked with Cutler for more than 20 years.

**Toledo** Piano player in Ma’s band. A self-educated and literate member of the band, Toledo speaks eloquently about the black man’s experience at the time and tries to educate the other members of the band.

**Levee** Young and arrogant, Levee is a talented trumpet player who considers himself an artist. His ambition to write his own music and make it big with his own band causes tension with the rest of the band.

**Sylvester Brown** Ma Rainey’s 20-something nephew. Ma wants him to do the introduction on the “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” record, but his stutter causes conflict with the rest of the band.

**Dussie Mae** Ma Rainey’s young lesbian lover. Dussie Mae’s own ambition is evident in her willingness to entertain Levee’s advances in the few moments when she is able to call attention to herself.



*Costume Rendering for Slow Drag*



*Costume Rendering for Dussie Mae*

**POST-SHOW ACTIVITY:** Who do you think was the main character of MA RAINERY’S BLACK BOTTOM? Why? Is there a protagonist of this piece? An antagonist? Write down your ideas and share them with a small group.

# THE BLUES

Blues music was born on the Mississippi Delta after the Civil War. It has its roots in the work songs and spirituals of plantation slaves, combining the free-form lyrical patterns of the former with the expressive vocalization of the latter. Unlike its predecessors, however, blues music is intensely personal.

Where work songs and spirituals were born from a yearning for solidarity, the blues fulfilled the need for self-expression. Freed slaves were being integrated into a society that placed high value on individuality. As a result, blues songs reflect the individual's ability to overcome hard luck and adversity.

*The original lyrical form of a blues verse consisted of a single line repeated four times. This later evolved into the AAB form commonly used today. Blues musicians make use of the blue scale, where notes are sung or played or at a lower or flatter pitch than those of the major scale, producing an expressive, melancholy sound.*

The use of the word “blue” to describe low spirits dates back as far as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The phrase “the blues” is a shortening of “the blue devils,” demons who were popularly thought to cause depression. The musical style was officially named in 1912, with the publication of Hart Wand’s “Dallas Blues”, though the term had been unofficially used by blues musicians for years prior.

The success of “Dallas Blues,” along with the simultaneously released “Memphis Blues” and “Baby Seals’ Blues,” brought blues music to a mainstream audience. In 1920, Mamie Smith’s recordings of “Crazy Blues”

and “It’s Right Here For You” sold 75,000 copies within their first month of release and opened the doors for other blues artists. Companies were eager to exploit the new “race record” market, so called because the album’s were purchased almost exclusively by black consumers. Artists such as

Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey and Blind Lemon Jefferson made names for themselves during the 1920s boom.

As record sales slumped during the Great Depression, the blues migrated north to cities like Detroit and Chicago. The urban blues were born, combining aspects of many regional styles into a more sophisticated, polished sound.



From the 1940s onward, urban blues influenced the development of many new musical styles through its use of the 12-bar (AAB) style and the use of the blues scale. For example, the ladder of thirds is a melodic structure common in rock and roll songs like The Beatles’ “A Hard Day’s Night” and The Who’s “My Generation,” that was built on the framework of the blues scale. Elvis Presley’s famous “Hound Dog” follows a strict AAB structure, since it was originally recorded as a blues single by Big Mama Thornton. Jazz, rock and roll, rockabilly, folk and country all share varying degrees of blues influence.

**POST-SHOW ACTIVITY:** The blues originally started to express yourself and were considered a reflection of overcoming bad luck. Write your own blues lyrics about a time in your life you overcame something. Share your lyrics with a small group.

**POST-SHOW ACTIVITY:** Listen to some of Ma Rainey’s music. Do you think her songs are still relevant to today? How so? Discuss your thoughts with your classmates.

# SETTING THE STAGE: 1920s AMERICA

The 1920s, also known as the Roaring '20s, are considered the beginning years of modern America. With World War I coming to an end, the United States looked at itself with optimism and strength. Despite the boom in technology and economic growth, problems still occurred in the states.

At the very beginning of the decade, the US saw the 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment pass—Prohibition. Despite the fact that alcohol sales were illegal, people frequently drank at “Speakeasies,” hidden bars and night clubs. The government believed that by banning alcohol, families would be protected from effects of alcohol abuse. However, this ban helped create organized crime with people importing liquor from Canada and Europe and some brewing it in their own homes. With people drinking illegally, more money was put into criminal hands, including the mob. The 18<sup>th</sup> Amendment was not recalled until 1932. Prohibition was supposed to lower crime and corruption, reduce social problems and lower taxes; however, in the end, alcohol became more dangerous to consume, courts and prison systems became overloaded and corruption of the police and public officials occurred.

The early 1920s also saw the Red Scare. During this time, communism, fascism and socialism threatened American politics. Following the war, people began to focus on social and cultural issues. The public wanted an end to labor problems and racial strife, a return to Christian values, less government interference and more conservative politics. All this led to people turning to mainly communism, a movement that aims for a classless society. Despite the rise in this movement, it never gained good enough footing to take over democracy in the states.

The US saw great economic growth with widespread prosperity driven by government growth policies, a boom in construction and rapid growth of consumer products, including the automobile. New production methods allowed manufacturers to make larger profits as well as an increase in wages. With these increased profits and incomes, people began to prosper. It was not uncommon for a family to buy many big ticket items like refrigerators, washing machines, furniture and cars. Previously, only wealthy families could afford these things, but with the increase in production, almost anyone could purchase these items. People also began buying stock in order to gain more money. The public was

## HOW MUCH DID THAT COST?

### Then

**Coke** 8 oz glass bottle: \$0.05

**Car** New 1925 Model T Ford: \$300

**Fancy pair of men's shoes** Handmade leather shoes: \$8.50

**Record** A new Ma Rainey record: \$0.39

**Sandwich** Steak Sandwich at the Cotton Club: \$1.25

### Now

12 oz can: \$0.80

New 2011 Ford Taurus: \$24,810

Handmade leather shoes: \$325

New CD at Barnes and Nobles: \$15-\$20

Steak sandwich at Saz's Steak-house: \$14.50

Price Chart adapted from Actors Theatre of Louisville's MA RAINY'S BLACK BOTTOM study guide





allowed to purchase these large items and shares with down payments and the remainder of the cost paid over time with interest. This was the first time that brokers allowed this to happen and the economy boomed from all the cash transactions. Eventually with so many loans out and interest rates going up, the Stock Market crashed in 1929 and the Roaring Twenties came to an end.

## CHICAGO, 1927

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM takes place during The Great Migration, a time when tension was high and violence was abundant. When the Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863, less than 80% of African Americans lived in the north. The Great Migration brought African-Americans from the south to north, including Chicago, during 1910 to 1960. African-Americans had one goal by moving north: to build a community where blacks could pursue life with the same rights as whites. Opportunities for community organizations and businesses were abundant and in the 50 years The Great Migration spanned over 4.8 million African-Americans traveled north.

Prior to this time, Chicago was the home to mainly whites. During the early years of the

migration Chicago's black population grew by 148%. When the city saw an influx of African-Americans entering, the citizens were not as friendly as many had hoped. Racial tensions began to increase as African-Americans realized that there was just as much racism in the north as there was in the south. The majority of them settled on the south side of Chicago, but it was still extremely difficult to find places to live and places to work.

Eventually, the tension peaked and on July 27, 1919 when an African-American youth was

drowned. The exact causes were never determined, but this event led to rioting for a week. Police officers did little to stop the violence and eventually the state militia was called in to end the violence. Rioting led to 23 African-Americans and 15 whites died and 537 people injured. Despite the accusations against African-Americans and the



*African-Americans and whites flock the city streets during the riots in Chicago. 38 people died during the riots and hundreds were injured.*

unrest that shortly followed, things began to look up during the mid to late 1920s. The employment rate went up and people began to accept the changes that happened in the city. The Great Migration established the foundation of Chicago's African-American industrial working class, political power and business enterprise.

**PRE-SHOW ACTIVITY:** MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM is the only play in the *Century Cycle* (see page 12) that does not take place in the Pittsburgh area. Why do you think Wilson chose to set this play in Chicago? What else was happening in Chicago during the 1920s? Do you think the play would have a different meaning if it was set in Pittsburgh? What about down south or the west coast? Discuss your ideas with your classmates.

# GERTRUDE “MA” RAINEY: THE MOTHER OF THE BLUES

*This article was researched and written by Christina Lepri, Education Intern at the Actors Theatre of Louisville.*

The character of Ma Rainey may seem larger than life, but the fiery diva was actually one of the most popular Blues artists of the 1920s. The real Ma Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett on April 26, 1886 in Columbus, Georgia. Gertrude first performed at the age of 14 at the Springer Opera House. In 1904, she married fellow performer Will “Pa” Rainey and the couple began touring together as “Rainey and Rainey, Assassins of The Blues.” Although they divorced 12 years later, Ma kept her stage name for the rest of her career.

After her divorce, Ma’s popularity as a solo Blues singer skyrocketed in the South and she became one of the foremost performers of The Blues. Paramount Records, based in Grafton, Wisconsin, signed her in 1923, making her one of the first African American Blues singers to snag a recording contract. Ma performed with some of the greatest musicians of her time, including Louis Armstrong and Fletcher Henderson, she was a star in her own right.

Ma Rainey performed songs



*Costume  
Rendering for Ma  
Rainey*

that contained provocative images of women who were independent, and defiant. Through The Blues, Ma was able to address some of the most stringently taboo subjects of her time, like domestic abuse and female sexuality. Ma quite openly referred to her own bisexuality in lyrics like “*Went out last night with a crowd of my friends, They must’ve been women, ‘cause I don’t like no men*” from the song “Prove It On Me Blues.”

Another hit, “Black Eye Blues” portrayed women who were the victims of domestic violence, and yet still come off as resilient and powerful forces to be reckoned with.

*“Take all my money, blacken both of my eyes, Give it to another woman, come home and tell me lies; You low down alligator, just watch me sooner or later, Gonna catch you with your britches down.”*

Strange as it may seem, one of the most revolutionary ideas Ma brought to her fans was travel. Ma belonged to one of the first generations of black women who had freedom of movement, a fact she sang about in songs like



“Leaving This Morning,” “Runaway Blues,” and, one of Ma’s favorites, “Traveling Blues.” In a rare interview, Ma talked about an act where she would come onto the stage dressed in traveling clothes and carrying a suitcase: “I put the suitcase down, real easy like, then stand there like I was thinking—just to let them see what I was about. Then I sing. You could just see them. . . wanting to go someplace else.”



Costume  
Rendering for  
Sylvester

Ma recorded more than 92 songs with Paramount Records between 1923 and 1928. But in the 1930s, female Blues singers began to wane in popularity, including Ma. She eventually moved back down to Columbus where she managed two theatres until she died in 1939. Unfortunately, due to the low quality of the records made for Paramount’s black customers, many of Ma’s albums suffered



Ma Rainey and her band

severe damage over time. Yet her legacy lives on. In 1983, sixty years after her first recording for Paramount, Ma was posthumously inducted into The Blues Foundation’s Hall of Fame and into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990. She lives on as an example of female resilience, autonomy, and musical influence that can best be summed up in Ma’s well-earned nickname: the Mother of The Blues.

**PRE-SHOW ACTIVITY:** Research other female Blues artists of the time and listen to their music (Bessie Smith, Ethel Walters and Mamie Smith are some examples). What were their lives like? Were they as successful as Ma Rainey? How did they gain their success? Why do you think it was so important for the female artists to gain footing during the 1920s? Share what you have found with your classmates.

**POST-SHOW ACTIVITY:** The play is called MA RAINNEY’S BLACK BOTTOM, but Ma Rainey herself doesn’t get a lot of stage time. Why do you think that is? How do the only two female characters, Ma Rainey and Dussie Mae, try to have a voice in this male-dominated recording studio? Discuss your answers with your classmates.

**POST-SHOW ACTIVITY:** Many of the characters in MA RAINNEY’S BLACK BOTTOM suffer from lack of control over their music, pay and other aspects of their lives. Write about a moment in your life when you did not have control over a situation. What happened? How did it make you feel? Did you ever gain control or did you just accept the situation? Share your thoughts with a small group.



Costume  
Rendering for  
Irvin



# THE CENTURY CYCLE

August Wilson is best known for his *Century Cycle*, also known as the *Pittsburgh Cycle*. This cycle consists of ten plays covering ten decades in the lives of African Americans. All but one take place in the Hill District, Wilson's hometown, and while many of them are not connected by means of a serial story, many characters appear in more than one play. Wilson's *Century Cycle* allows us to see the African American experience in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

## GEM OF THE OCEAN ● Set in 1904

A young African American, Citizen Barlow, travels north in search of a purpose. He visits Aunt Ester, a woman rumored to be 285 years old and possessing healing powers, in hopes that she will help him on his path. (Written in 2003)



Stephanie Berry and Shane Taylor in The Rep's production of GEM OF THE OCEAN (2006).

## MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM ● Set in 1927

The tension builds as a group of musicians wait for (real blues legend) Ma Rainey to arrive at the recording studio. Exploited by the white-run music industry, they are pushed to the breaking point. This is the only play set outside of Pittsburgh. (Written in 1984)

Greta Oglesby  
The Rep's  
production of  
MA RAINEY'S  
BLACK  
BOTTOM  
(2011).



## Set in 1911

### JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE

While a man searches for his wife he arrives at a boarding house that offers room and nourishment to those who have been mistreated or abused by white society. He sets out to rediscover his identity. (Written in 1988 and produced at The Rep during the 1993/94 season)

## Set in 1936

### THE PIANO LESSON

A piano that has been passed down through the generations becomes the source of conflict as members of the Charles family argue whether to keep it or sell it, despite its significance and historical background. (Written in 1990)

## SEVEN GUITARS

Set in 1948

This play begins with the death of guitarist Floyd Barton and then flashes back to the final week of his life. (Written in 1995)

## TWO TRAINS RUNNING

Set in 1969

As a group hangs out a café, romance grows between a waitress and an ex-convict trying to salvage his life; however, many of the characters are too hooked on the past to realize the potential for the future. (Written in 1991)

## KING HEDLEY II

Set in 1985

After being in jail for seven years, the main character hopes to open a video store in the Hill District. Despite his good intentions, he ends up becoming an armed robber and wrecks any chance he has at redemption. (Written in 1999)

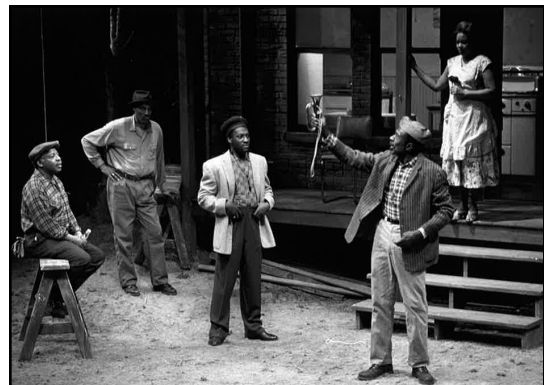


Tyrone Mitchell Henderson in The Rep's production of RADIO GOLF (2010).

Set in 1957

## FENCES

A former baseball hero now turned trash collector holds a grudge against his son for winning an athletic scholarship. It focuses on the struggle for justice and fair treatment for African Americans in the 1950s. (Written in 1987)



The cast of The Rep's production of FENCES (1990).

Set in 1977

## JITNEY

Set in a cab driver's station, the owner of the station and his son, who has been recently released from prison, try to rekindle their relationship. (Written in 1982 and produced at The Rep during the 2001/02 season)

Set in 1997

## RADIO GOLF

The final play tells the story of real estate developer Harmond Wilks, his quest to become the first black mayor of Pittsburgh and his plan to rejuvenate the Hill District, which would require tearing down Aunt Ester's house. (Written in 2005)

# AN INTERVIEW WITH RON OJ PARSON, DIRECTOR

**How do you approach directing a piece? Do you have a set way of doing things or is each play different?**

Each play is different. In a general sense, for me, it's a very collaborative and organic way of working. Everyone is different. Some directors are very regimented and military. But my approach is very different because I'm also an actor. I don't want to work in a way that I wouldn't want to work as an actor. It's a very open process. Not having everything totally laid out as to how it's going to go. We call it crafting instead of blocking. To me, and I learned this from a friend of mine, a very brilliant director/actor named Steven Henderson, if you block it out your blocking creativity, so we craft it out so that it's collaborative. It's a very organic process.

**Now, MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM is a co-production with Actors Theater of Louisville. How has this experience been working with two theaters almost 400 miles apart? How is working on a co-production different than working on a production with one theater?**

It is different. I have been in that situation several times and it is different because you have two different artistic senses. I would think that if where it [the play] begins and where it ends, that's a whole different ball of wax. In this case, because we started there, it's usually one theater

that knows the designers so it's just like anything where you have two people. . . You compromise, you collaborate. It's interesting, but it's also cool. It's great to travel with something like this and usually the second leg is easier, but also you can have different actors. We had to plug in one and that usually adds another level to it. I try to approach it for them as if it's new. I am going to make a few changes. I watched the archival tape and there are some things I want to adjust. And we have to adjust to the different theater. So those kinds of things come into play. But you don't have as much time in the second leg of it to get it together. But we put this together down there pretty quick, technically, because I had done it at Court Theatre recently, so we were able to get the sound design and music quickly. If you have to design and go to the recording studio it takes a

lot of time and we had that already.

**You've directed eight out of the ten plays in August Wilson's *Century Cycle*. How has it been to direct Wilson's plays?**

It's been beautiful. It's like doing any great playwright, and getting to do all their work, like Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and August Wilson is right on up there with them. Whenever you get a chance to go at it, especially in the way I work in that collaborative fashion, each one of them is going to be different. Like this one [MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM] is different than the one at Court [Theatre]. It's





fresh and new and the characters are very multi-leveled and the lyricism of the language and poetry makes it always exciting to work on August Wilson.

### **So what makes these pieces so endearing?**

Yeah, that's a good question. When people ask me why this one [MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM] is my favorite I tell them because this is the first piece that really got him [Wilson] out there. He wrote JITNEY first, but this one was the one that made him really successful. The educational value that you get out of the plays is great. You're able to learn. For instance, when I was first introduced to this piece in the early '80s, with Charles Dutton and I had met August back then, I learned about Ma Rainey and the Blues. It was very interesting to learn about, I didn't know about Ma Rainey. I knew about Bessie Smith. And that's the ironic thing is that a lot of people knew about Bessie Smith, but in this you'll learn that Bessie came up because of Ma; she was a backup singer for Ma for a long time. In that sense, Wilson's plays are all like that. They're all very educational as well as entertaining. They don't drum the educational part into you, but you learn about the inner city, in the later ones they all took place in Pittsburgh, so you get a lot of Pittsburgh history. Part of my whole mission as a director is to educate people and entertain people at the same time.

### **This piece was written 27 years ago and takes place 84 years ago. What's the relevance between the show and today's society?**

The music industry for one. I think it's very exploitive still, even though many people won't agree with me. There are a lot of multi-millionaire performers now, but they're still being exploited. If the young entertainers are making that much money, the record labels are making so much more that there is still that element. I think a lot of the societal things are still relevant. The racism still exists. The discrimination in the industry and other industries and I think that is still relevant to today. I don't think it's completely changed, even with having a President of color.

### **What do you want the audience to take away from the show?**

Going back to the whole mission of educating and entertaining, I hope that people will be entertained, but will be moved enough to learn more about that period and its history. They are historical dramas and they take place in certain periods. A lot of people forget about the '20s or don't know a lot about the '20s. I'm hoping that people will go to the library or Internet and learn more about Ma. I hope that people will get moved by it and learn a little bit about exploitation can really ruin a person and their spirit.

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# VISITING THE REP

Milwaukee Repertory Theater is housed in the Milwaukee Center at the corner of Wells and Water Streets, downtown. Our building was formerly the home of the Electric Railway and Light Company. This name is still carved on the wall outside.

You'll enter on the Wells Street side into a large, open space. Our Ticket Office will be visible on your left as you come through the front doors. The large space is the main hub for the businesses that share this building: a bank, an office tower, the Pabst Theater and the Intercontinental Hotel. If you walk into the center of this area, you'll see a staircase on your left. You will take this staircase to the Quadracci Powerhouse lobby.

Inside the lobby are restrooms, water fountains, and a coat check. If you decide to bring a snack, please know that food and drink are NOT permitted in the theater. However, you can leave things (at your own risk) at the coat check and enjoy them outside the theater during intermission. Most plays have one intermission that is about 20 minutes long. You might also want to look for signs in the lobby which give the full "running time" of the play.

**For more information on our Education Programs and our productions,  
please visit our website at [www.milwaukeeerep.com](http://www.milwaukeeerep.com)**

## **Programs in the Education Department receive generous funding from:**

The Einhorn Family Foundation	MPS Partnership for the Arts
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**"You need three things in the theatre – the play, the actors and the audience – and each must give something." –  
Kenneth Haigh**

Theater is described as a collaborative art form. The success of a production relies upon every member of the process: playwrights, directors, designers, technicians, actors and the audience. Plays require audiences to give a new life to performances through their careful attention and enthusiastic reactions. The audience has an active role to play and the actors rely on you to be respectful and attentive. Through your observation of sets, costumes, lighting and the work of the actors, you'll be better able to follow the story and enjoy its live presentation. You are important in the final performance and your participation is what makes this process worthwhile.

## ***Milwaukee Repertory Theater Education Department***

**<http://www.milwaukeeerep.com/education/outreach.htm>**

Jenny Kostreva, Education Director  
[jkostreva@milwaukeeerep.com](mailto:jkostreva@milwaukeeerep.com) or 414-290-5370

Rebecca Witt, Education Coordinator  
[rwitt@milwaukeeerep.com](mailto:rwitt@milwaukeeerep.com) or 414-290-5393