



WBGO JAZZ 88.3FM BROADCAST FROM TWO RIVER THEATER

On August 18, Two River audiences were treated to a live interview with director Ruben Santiago-Hudson and *Ma Rainey* cast members Michael Cumpsty (Irvin), Brandon J. Dirden (Levee) and Arnetia Walker (Ma Rainey), hosted by WBGO News Director Doug Doyle and recorded for broadcast on WBGO Jazz 88.3 FM. The following excerpts are edited and condensed from that conversation.

To listen to the complete interview, visit www.wbgo.org/journal or tworivertheater.org



Left to Right: Michael Cumpsty, Brandon J. Dirden, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Arnetia Walker and Doug Doyle. Photo by Carmen Balentine, courtesy of WBGO.

DOUG DOYLE: August Wilson was first exposed to the blues by listening to a Bessie Smith tune. When you think about the music, how important is the music to August Wilson and how important is the music to you, Ruben?

RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON: Everything that has ever happened in black culture, black history, black life is in the blues. Everything. August's words are the blues. Listen to some of the things they say in the play, not just in the singing but also in the talking. In August Wilson, we have an opportunity to speak where the world would not allow black people to speak. We have to come to arenas to speak. Barbershops, pool halls, a storefront, rooming houses, crap games, after hour joints, speakeasies. We had to go to arenas where we could talk loud because if we talk loud in the street, we were going to jail.

ARNETIA WALKER: I find it interesting that music is such an integral part of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and it's all about music, around music, but the play itself is not a musical.

RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON: No, it's not a musical and that's where a lot of people make mistakes. They go "I want to know about Ma Rainey." This play is not about Ma Rainey, it's about African American existence in 1927 in the music industry. How we navigated our circumstances. How we navigated our lives in this place called America 62 years removed from slavery. 1927 and 50 of those 62 years we spent doing our own thing, it was called

Reconstruction, where we ran everything. The government didn't like that, white folks didn't like that, we were doing so good running our own thing, they said "Nope, no more." So they brought us into the regular world where they could control us and that's what's happening in *Ma Rainey*, they're controlling this session. Ma Rainey tells them a few times "I don't have to be here, I'll go back to my tour, I've got my own fans," and it was true. Ma Rainey could pitch a tent and five thousand people would come. So now this woman is a star walking out on the stage in Chicago in the State Theatre and the whole crowd stood up and she ain't sung a note, just walked out there, she was so black and pretty and glamorous. Gorgeous in her spirit and her heart and the fact that she could tell her stories unabated, unashamed, you know? And did it her way. That's beauty.

DOUG DOYLE: So it's not a story about Ma Rainey, but there's still the responsibility, Arnetia, of playing someone who not everybody knows about. What kind of pressure is there to tell the story?

ARNETIA WALKER: I wouldn't really say that I'm under pressure. I think I'm in awe of this woman. I had heard of Ma Rainey but I didn't really know who Ma Rainey was. The first time I read the play, something stirred inside of me and I was like, I know this person. I think more than feeling pressure, I feel a responsibility to really do justice to this character and portray her in a way that people understand just how really incredible she was.

DOUG DOYLE: Just doing a little homework on you, Ruben, the words that jumped out at me are love, integrity and truth. Tell us why those words popped out at me when it comes to Ruben Santiago-Hudson.

RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON: It's not me; it's my culture, it's my community. We are so full of those things; we are so inundated, saturated in love and integrity, truth. They seem to be robbed from us, taken from us, denied from my culture and my community and I just want to make sure that anything that I do, that I'm committed and obligated and responsible and accountable to that community, to make sure that everyone understands it, that we have tremendous love, tremendous truth, tremendous integrity and I try to be representative of that.

BRANDON J. DIRDEN: I have a familiarity with the body of work of August Wilson and Levee has been on my radar for the last 25 years. I've got to say there's more to him than I thought there was. It's taking a look at the bigger spectrum of humanity that we as actors, especially black actors, don't always get a chance to investigate. In a lot of rooms, we don't have the expectation to bring our full humanity. It's not always desired in those rooms, it's not always invited into those rooms, and it's certainly not always expected, but that's a testament to Ruben and why I keep coming back anytime he calls. I'm allowed to fully investigate my humanity. When I come to work at Two River Theater, I'm in a room where

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I know coming out at the other end of this process, I'm going to be bigger, I'm going to be better, I'm going to have more love in my heart, I'm going to have a better way to communicate my wishes, my thoughts, my insecurities, my fears, and I can do that knowing that I'm safe in this place. It's unparalleled. It's unparalleled to any other room I've ever been in.

RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON: It's one thing to do film and TV and all other things that I've been blessed to do, but when you come into theater—that's a sacred space to me. This is a hungry audience that comes in here now. This audience is eclectic at Two River, it's diverse, and they come in curious and open.

DOUG DOYLE: Brandon, you play the trumpeter Levee. What's this character all about?

BRANDON J. DIRDEN: Levee is a warrior, and I know how drawn August Wilson was to the warrior spirit in us. You've got to take a look at our history in this country. We are only here because of that warrior spirit—that we refuse to accept everything that's been handed to us and given to us. Levee has a line in the play, "Are you going to be satisfied with the bones somebody throws you when you see

them eating the whole hog?" Well, the notion is that's your hog too. You fed that hog, you raised that hog, you slogged that hog, and now you're going to put the bacon on his plate? And I think that's what Levee is after. He's after his piece of the hog. He wants it too and this is 1927 in America, so we know he's going to have some trouble getting that hog.

DOUG DOYLE: Michael Cumpsty plays Irvin, Ma Rainey's manager. What have you learned about that time period and managing a superstar that happens to be a superstar of a different color?

MICHAEL CUMPSTY: Well, it's the third day of rehearsals, so in terms of the actual minutiae of what it meant to be a businessman in the recording industry working with a black artist in 1927, that is all still to be learned. But one of the things that I'm finding remarkable about this play is that there are three white guys and August Wilson doesn't paint any one of them as 'the bad guy.' And yet, what you see is an inability really to connect. Ma Rainey has a line where she says, "He's been my manager for six years, always talking about sticking together, and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends." I can't even

determine whether my guy is working for her or against her in certain moments. It makes me see even more clearly how this barrier, this perhaps transparent barrier exists. You can't really get at each other, you know? You can't finally connect because the barriers are just too entrenched and we're still working on that, of course.

DOUG DOYLE: Ruben, you first saw *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1984 on Broadway. Take us back to that moment and what it meant to you.

RUBEN SANTIAGO-HUDSON: I walked in the theater at intermission because I couldn't afford the price of the full ticket. I just got that program and slid in there at intermission and sat on the double mezzanine at the top of the Cort Theatre. I looked down and the lights came up and these actors started talking and I instantly was at home. I knew that I was safe as an actor in the American theater because there was a playwright and a director who had presented the kind of work and validity to my existence as an African American man. These people were so familiar to me; they brought me joy. It was seeing my family, and I knew that I had to do everything in my power to become a part of that.

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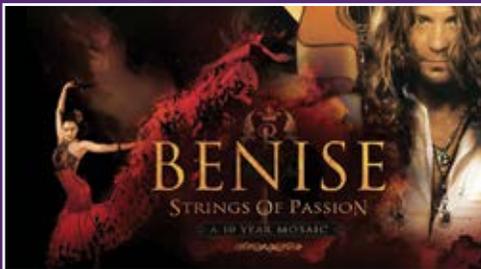
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