

# THE HUFFINGTON POST

## **MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\* TWO RIVER THEATER**

You know you're in good hands with director Ruben Santiago-Hudson. If he's directing a mounting of a play from Wilson's Century Cycle anywhere in the country, you know it's going to reach a certain standard. And so I was happy to venture out of New York City for my first (but not last) trip to Two River Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey to see my first full production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. (I also saw Santiago-Hudson's direction of a radio play mounting of the show, essentially a reading but a very rich and satisfying one.)

Two River is an impressive regional theater space with two venues, including the handsome main-stage where I saw *Ma Rainey*. The tech elements of the show were of the highest quality, including costumes, lighting, sound and especially a set by Charlie Corcoran worthy of Broadway in its lavish detail and well thought-out dramatic effect. If you've seen the new Signature Theater home on 42nd Street, that will give you a sense of this venue's scope. They've promised to tackle every drama in Wilson's ten play saga and I won't hesitate to return there to see more.

Now on to the play itself. Set in the 1920s, it tells the story of Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues who mentored Bessie Smith, only to see that upstart become a bigger star and outsell Ma by a large degree. Ma could still move race records but she long ago realized the game: on the road, she was the boss. In the studio, the white men were going to make every dime off her they could and there wasn't much she could do about it. But until they captured her voice on record, she held the power. And Ma made the most of it, singing the songs she wanted, the way she wanted, with the arrangements she wanted. And she wasn't *about* to open her mouth until they got her a cold Coca-Cola because they knew Ma Rainey won't sing until she's got her Coca-Cola in hand.

But just as Ma Rainey is no longer the star of the circuit, she's not the star of this show. The sidemen are the heart of the story here, with musicians rehearsing the songs, bantering back and forth, cadging a bit of reefer or a snort of liquor and generally making hay while they wait for Ma Rainey to show up. All four musicians are so vivid, it's doubly insulting that Ma's white manager (ably performed by the marvelous Michael Cumpsty) can't ever remember their names. Cutler (James A Williams) is the leader of the band; Toledo (Brian D. Coats) the voice of wisdom; and Slow Drag (Harvy Blanks) the good-time cut up.

Those three each spar at one time or another with Levee (Brandon J. Dirden), the sexy trumpet player looking to move in on Ma's new sweetheart, get his arrangements performed on Ma's records and then start his own band with original hot tunes that he's sure will get the folks swinging. Levee is the dominant character and Dirden makes the most of him, delivering a fully realized performance that captures this man in all his complex, desperate, doomed and appealing glory.

Wilson's plays are so rich that I'm finding it takes a production or two before I can start to wrap my mind around all that's going on. I've read them all at least once, seen them all at least once (albeit just a radio production of *Gem Of The Ocean*) and originally I slotted *Ma Rainey* as a "lesser" Wilson play. "Lesser" in this context means very, very good and even great but not *quite* one of the towering masterpieces of Wilson at his best. I remembered it as slightly more compact and straightforward than the marvelous sprawl of *Joe Turner's Come And Gone*, for example.

Well, I was wrong. The monologues in which Levee recounts the brutal rape of his mother by white men and how his father aw-shucked his way around the white men who did it (all while plotting his revenge) was wrenching. As were stories of the legendary gospel figure Rev. Gates being humiliated when he's stranded in a small town or the hilarious tale of Slow Drag making the move on a man's girl right in front of him. The stories come tumbling out and you hear Wilson tackling race and religion and the music industry and how black people deal with white people and how black people deal with one another and the ways white people poison even that. It's tight and funny and deep and I don't think I've begun to sound the depths of it yet. Seeing Wilson again and again is like seeing Shakespeare again and again; if there's a play of his you think you don't really like as much, you just haven't seen the right production yet.

In my ideal, dream production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the musicians would be playing their instruments, though that's a heavy lift given the demands of the parts and the music they play. Happily, the singing is live and very satisfying. Arnetia Walker's Ma Rainey is a bit toothless (at this stage her bark seems much worse than her bite) but I could see how that take works, even though one expects Rainey to barrel in and take over the show. Similarly, Chanté Adams cut a fine figure as Ma's new flame but was a tad inconsistent, though on target in her scenes with Levee. In contrast, Marcel Spears was very good as the stuttering Sylvester, a role that can be easily seen as mere comic relief. And Peter Van Wagner kept the record label owner a genuine, if quietly merciless, figure.

Williams and Blanks were very appealing throughout. Though it was the final performance, Coats had a few subtle stumbles on his lines. And yet, he was deeply appealing as Toledo, giving this fount of wisdom (or know-it-all-ness, if you're Levee) a rounded empathy. Levee dominates effortlessly, but the play is so rich you can imagine a production that left you feeling Toledo or even Cutler or Ma was its beating heart. Of course, with Wilson, they all are.