



## **‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom’: In 1927 Chicago, a glimpse of the future**

By: JAY LUSTIG | October 2, 2016



T. CHARLES ERICKSON

Brandon J. Dirden stars in “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” which will be at the Two River Theater in Red Bank through Oct. 9.

Just like Carl Perkins' mythical blue suede shoes, the stylish green and brown shoes that Levee (played by Brandon J. Dirden) wears in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" — currently playing at the Two River Theater in Red Bank — serve notice that he is special, that he is fierce, that he represents the future. And he knows it.

The 1982 play — part of August Wilson's "Pittsburgh Cycle" — is not primarily about the famous blues singer Ma Rainey or the Ma Rainey song whose name gives the play its title. Most of the dialogue — and the dramatic tension — is between the four musicians who end up spending much of the day waiting for the diva who employs them to be ready to begin her recording session.

The impetuous trumpeter Levee, who wants the band to use his arrangement of the play's title song, butts head with the others. He seems to be a real artist, trying to do something adventurous with the song, but the others are just looking to play what's expected of them and get paid.

"I'm talking about art!" he insists.

"You ain't no Buddy Bolden or King Oliver," responds bandleader Cutler (James A. Williams). "You're just an old trumpet player come dime a dozen. Talking about art."

Will Levee win or lose this fight? Can the band survive his revolutionary presence? And will the mercurial Ma Rainey cooperate enough so they can actually get the session done?



From left, Arnetia Walker, Brian D. Coats and Harvy Blanks in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

The play is set in 1927 — all the plays in the “Pittsburgh Cycle” are set in a different decade of the 20th century. Unlike the rest of the “Pittsburgh Cycle” plays, though, it takes place in the musically important city of Chicago, not in Pittsburgh. There is some music in it — performed quite well, by the actors — but it’s not a musical, per se.

A great “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” needs a great Levee, and this production, directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, has one in Dirden, who lets us feel the hurt behind Levee’s bluster, and simmers until he explodes. Arnetia Walker, who plays Ma Rainey, radiates a convincing amount of star power, and the rest of the cast (including Michael Cumpsty as Ma’s long-suffering manager, Irvin; Peter Van Wagner as the heartless studio owner and record label head, Mel Sturdyvant; and Chanté Adams as Ma’s girlfriend, Dussie Mae, who attracts interest from Levee as well) is first-rate.

In their interactions with each other, and with the musicians, Irvin and Sturdyvant, who are both white, are shown to be racists (though racists who are interested in making money off black musicians, of course). Irvin, in particular, keeps referring to the musicians as “boys,” and tells Studyvant, “You know they’re always late.”

The black characters fight back — and try to get ahead in a world where everything seems to be stacked against them — in their own ways. Pianist Toledo (Brian D. Coats) tries to transcend through intellectualism; Levee, through the force of his talent; Dussie Mae, through her sexuality; and Ma Rainey, through insisting that she gets what she is due.

She knows, though — and this is part of the play’s tragedy — that even though she is a star, she will never be an equal.

“He’s been my manager for six years, always talking about sticking together,” she says of Irvin, “and the only time he had me in his house was to sing for some of his friends.”

“Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” is at the Two River Theater in Red Bank through Oct. 9; visit [tworivertheater.org](http://tworivertheater.org).