

# The Star-Ledger

## Two River Theater scores again with August Wilson's 'Ma Rainey': review



Arnetia Walker stars as blues singer Ma Rainey in August Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," now being staged by Two River Theater in Red Bank  
(Photo by T Charles Erickson Photography)

By Patrick Maley | For NJ Advance Media

With "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Red Bank's Two River Theater continues an extraordinary run: Beginning with "Jitney" in 2012 and continuing with "Two Trains

Running" (2013) and "Seven Guitars" (2015), the theater has staged four seminal works by the great playwright August Wilson.

Under the direction of Wilson maestro Ruben Santiago-Hudson (who also directed Two River's "Jitney" and "Two Trains"), this new production sizzles and pops. Santiago-Hudson — who won a Tony for his supporting role in the original 1996 production of "Seven Guitars" — has assembled a cast of Wilson veterans, and their expertise shines through in their deft negotiation of the playwright's poetic language and their full-bodied evocation of his complex, troubled characters.

The result is a "Ma Rainey" that feels true and powerful; it's a wonderful evening of theater.

"Ma Rainey" is the 1920s play in Wilson's Century Cycle — a series of ten plays, each examining the African-American experience in a different decade of the 20th century — and the only one set outside of Pittsburgh. One tumultuous recording session unfolds in a Chicago studio: the title character clashes with management, tension brews among her band members, and society's racial politics loom.

Ma Rainey (Arnetia Walker) is a diva of the highest order, and makes no apologies. As far as she is concerned, she has made a lot of money for the record company so "they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them." The white men running the session — executive Sturdyvant (Peter Van Wagner) and manager Irvin (Michael Cumpsty) — believe they can reign in her attitude.

Walker embraces the various facets of this character well. Certainly her Ma rails shrilly when necessary, but she is also tender, studied and discerning. She knows exactly how she is perceived, but Walker — who also sings beautifully — simultaneously shows us that this persona is purposefully constructed and cleverly managed. A long career as a black woman in the music business has taught Ma how eager others are to exploit her. Walker makes clear that this character is bringing all of these life lessons to bear on this one recording session.

While Ma tussles with the businessmen upstairs in the recording studio, more drama unfolds downstairs (Charlie Corcoran's scenic design is meticulous) as the four-man accompaniment band spends more time arguing than warming up. Hot-shot trumpet player Levee (Brandon J. Dirden) tries to assert his musical superiority while pianist Toledo (Brian D. Coats) philosophizes about racial inequality, bassist Slow Drag (Harvy Blanks) sips whiskey, and band leader Cutler (James A. Williams) attempts to maintain order.

All the various conflicts will come to head over the course of the play, but the real strength of "Ma Rainey" lies in the journey towards the climax. Dirden, Coats, Blanks, and Williams evince a comfort and fluency with Wilson's characters honed through years of experience. Williams, for instance, like he did recently as Holloway in "Two Trains," Daub in "Jitney," and Doaker in "The Piano Lesson" (all directed by Santiago-

Hudson), breathes depth into Cutler, showing himself the resident master of Wilson's most reflective characters.

Two River regulars will recognize Coats from last season's stellar "Seven Guitars," where he was Hedley, himself an assertive and deceptively wise community sage. Hedley and Toledo may seem quite different on the surface, but Coats reveals how both share the heart of a revolutionary.

Toledo's adversary is the slick, self-interested Levee, played here with real urgency by Dirden, a regular on the Two River stage who made his directorial debut for last season's "Seven Guitars." Dirden's Levee is loud, forceful, cocky, and in no mood to be lectured by some philosophical piano player.

This "Ma Rainey" makes Two River four-for-four in its recent run of Wilson's Century Cycle, continuing a trend of quality that bodes well for the future; artistic director John Dias has pledged that the theater will stage all ten Cycle plays. (And who knows, maybe we'll get Wilson's one-man memoir play, "How I Learned What I Learned," as a coda). Wilson's blues, poetry and penetrating social critique have found an exciting home in Red Bank.

### **Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**

Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank, through October 9

Tickets available online (<http://www.tworivertheater.org/>)

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