

Talkin' BROADWAY

Regional Reviews: New Jersey

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

Two River Theater

Review by Cameron Kelsall | [Season Schedule](#)



Peter Van Wagner, Michael Cumpsty, Arnetia Walker, and Marcel Spears
Photo by T. Charles Erickson

The title of August Wilson's breakthrough play may be *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, but it's really Levee's blues. The storied songstress dubbed "The Mother of the Blues" may get the prominent perch—not to mention the final bow—but a staging of this play lives or dies by the actor playing her charismatic and dangerous trumpeter. Luckily, Two River

Theater has found in Brandon J. Dirden a Levee for the ages, and his lifts an already strong production into the stratosphere.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is the work that announced Wilson as a force to be reckoned with, and also serves as a precis for what became his life's work: his epic "Century Cycle," a collection of ten plays that chronicle African-American life in every decade of the twentieth century. Although the play differs from Wilson's others in significant ways—it's his only work that deals with an historical figure, as well as the only one not set in his hometown of Pittsburgh¹⁵¹; it introduces many of the important themes that permeate his canon. Using a recording session in a chilly Chicago studio in 1927 as a backdrop, Wilson explores racism, displacement, anger, jealousy, and human failing with equal measures humor and horror.

Most of the first act is spent waiting for Ma Rainey (the captivating Arnetia Walker), who's late, as usual. In addition to Levee, her band includes the philosophizing pianist Toledo (Brian D. Coats), as well as Slow Drag (Harvy Blanks) and Cutler (James A. Williams), former farmers who haven't shaken off their country origins. The men joke, smoke, and try to rehearse. Levee is on the up and up—not only has Ma's manager, Mr. Irvin (Michael Cumpsty, reliable as ever), decreed that she'll record Levee's new arrangement of the Black Bottom, but the producer Mr. Sturdyvant (Peter Van Wagner) has expressed interest in some of his compositions. Levee represents the growing influence of jazz in black music; he frequently decries "jug band" playing, which he deems antiquated.

Ma's arrival—along with her lover Dussie Mae (Chanté Adams) and her stuttering nephew Sylvester (Marcel Spears)—throws everything into chaos. She refuses to record Levee's arrangement, denigrating him along the way, and demands that Sylvester be given the plum assignment of announcing her song. (This leads to what is perhaps the play's one moment of genuine comic relief, and Spears is masterful in his stammering delivery). Levee seethes with anger at Ma's rebuke, and the demons he's buried beneath his freewheeling exterior broil to the surface.

Dirden ideally captures every aspect of this complicated character, and the result is a towering—and occasionally terrifying—performance. Rarely have I seen an audience as hushed as when Dirden delivers the spellbinding monologue that closes the first act, in which he describes the lengths to which his father went to get revenge on the white men who raped his mother. Levee tells the other men that they have no idea what he holds in his heart, and it's clear that he's right. The duality that is so central to this character is brilliantly expressed, right up until the play's shocking final moments. Dirden has burrowed deep into the emotional and psychological reaches of Levee, and the resulting performance is easily the best New Jersey will see all year.

The rest of the cast—under the pinpoint-precise direction of Ruben Santiago-Hudson—is in top form, as well. Walker has Ma's imperious nature down pat, but she also excels at showing the audience little hints of worry that lurk under her proud exterior. Ma is no longer young and no longer new—the popularity of her former protégé Bessie Smith is

growing every day. Although Ma shows no trouble acting like she rules the roost, the subtext that her days might be numbered is never far from the surface.

Blanks, Williams, and especially Coats have a brilliant rapport as the other musicians, and Cumpsty and Van Wagner are perfectly flummoxed as they try to keep several large egos in check. Although the role of Dussie Mae is not particularly interesting or flattering, Adams manages to deliver a charismatic and memorable performance.

Santiago-Hudson has an eye and an ear for Wilson's world and makes music of his own on Charlie Corcoran's impressive, two-tiered set. It's a testament to his talents how fresh and spontaneous every element of this production feels, even to someone who's read and seen the play several times before. Two River Theater has pledged to produce all ten works in Wilson's Century Cycle; *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is their fourth undertaking. I can't imagine these works in better hands, and I hope that artists as talented as Dirden and Santiago-Hudson keep coming back.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom continues through Sunday, October 9, 2016, at Two River Theater (21 Bridge Avenue in Red Bank, NJ). Tickets (\$20-70) can be purchased online at www.tworivetheater.org or by calling 732-345-1400. The box office is open Monday-Saturday from 10-6, Sunday from 12-5, and one hour prior to every performance.