

# 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom' opens at Two River Theater

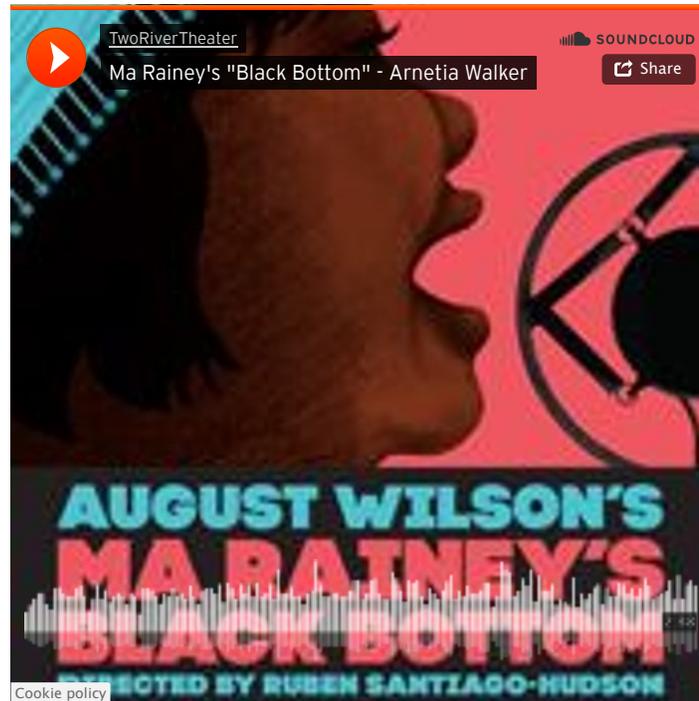
TOM CHESEK, CORRESPONDENT 10:29 a.m. EDT September 9, 2016



(Photo: by Carmen Balentine)

She was “The Mother of the Blues;” an outsize personality, a pioneer and a powerhouse who, as Arnetia Walker tells it, “knew her power...she knew she had something people wanted, and she wasn’t giving it up.”

Walker, the veteran actress and singer who made her Broadway debut at the age of 14 (in an ill-fated revival of a play by “Raisin the Sun” author Lorraine Hansberry) — and who’s accrued some considerable credits through regular roles on TV series (“Nurses,” “Popular”) and big-time turns on the New York stage (where she became the only performer to portray each one of The Dreams in Broadway’s “Dreamgirls”) — is referring to Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, the real-life 1920s recording artist at the heart of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.”



The blues-infused play by August Wilson inaugurates the 2016-2017 mainstage season at Red Bank’s Two River Theater, in a production helmed by Tony winning actor-director-author Ruben Santiago-Hudson.

Set inside a Chicago recording studio circa 1927, the 1984 ensemble piece represented the first Broadway breakthrough for Wilson, the late African American playwright whose ambitious “Century Cycle” of plays has been explored previously by Two River through the company’s stagings of “Jitney,” “Two Trains Running” and “Seven Guitars.”

Winner of the Best Play Tony Award in 1985, the drama addresses some big issues — racial conflicts, personal-professional rivalries, the role of religion in a realm of devil’s music, and the exploitation of the black artist by the white businessman — by framing them in the close-quarters powder keg of a particularly tense waxing session for Ma’s ever-popular “Black Bottom” dance record.

It’s an unusual Wilson work, in that it’s the only one of the Cycle that isn’t set in the Hill District of the playwright’s native Pittsburgh, and the only one that boasts a central character drawn from actual history.

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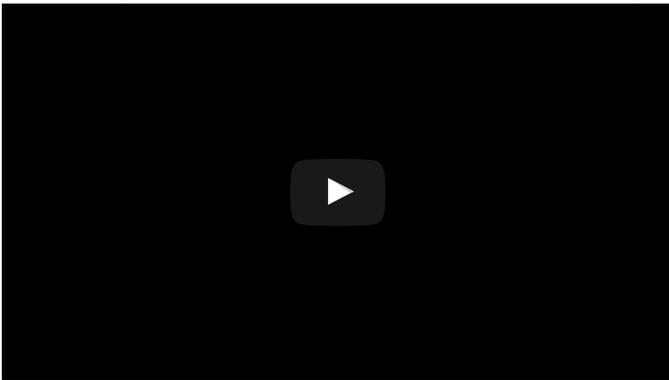
Making her belated entrance by “blowing in like a hurricane” with entourage in tow; keeping her poor band members Cutler, Levee, Slow Drag and Toledo waiting like some garrulous Godot; Ma Rainey is very much in command of the situation; a take-charge black woman whose pride and confidence come through in her music, even as they place her in conflict with everyone from her white manager and record man, to the trumpeter Levee, whose own ambitions threaten to bring him to a breaking point.



**Armetia Walker and Doug Doyle** (Photo: by Carmen Balentine)

“Ma was the first...she was smart, such a strong personality, and really a nice person who’d go out of her way to help someone like her stuttering nephew,” says Walker, who like Ma Rainey herself is a native of Columbus, Georgia. “She also was not afraid to express her sexuality, at a time when women just didn’t do things her way.”

The actress, whose early showbiz experiences included Joseph Papp’s 1971 rock musical adaptation of “Two Gentlemen of Verona,” and an understudy stint for Stephanie Mills in Broadway’s “The Wiz,” is part of an exciting cast assembled by Santiago-Hudson, the onetime Wilson colleague who brought his own script “Your Blues Ain’t Sweet Like Mine” to the Two River stage a couple of seasons back.



That show starred Brandon J. Dirden, a familiar presence on Broadway (as Martin Luther King Jr. in “All the Way”) and series TV (as Agent Aderholt on “The Americans”) who’s returning to Red Bank for his fifth Two River project, including a directorial debut on last year’s “Seven Guitars.”



Brandon J. Dirden will be in Two River Theater's of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," a lively celebration of the "Mother of the Blues" as seen through the 1920s Chicago music scene. (Photo: Courtesy of Two River Theater)

An Obie winner (as "Hamlet," no less), Tony nominee ("End of the Rainbow") and frequently encountered player on the Two River stage (where he directed Wendy Wasserstein's "Third"), Broadway veteran Michael Cumpsty makes his first appearance in an August Wilson play as Ma's manager Irvin, in advance of starring as King Henry II in the production of "The Lion in Winter" that follows "Black Bottom" to Red Bank in November. Also featured are two other veterans of August Wilson productions at Two River: Brian D. Coats ("Seven Guitars") and James A. Williams ("Two Trains," "Jitney").

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The director and several of his cast members (including Walker, who delivered a sultry rendition of the show's title tune) took the stage during a recent live cast interview with jazz radio station WBGO — and the actors were on the scene for a meet and greet with the public, during a Taste of the Blues Block Party that commandeered the theater's outdoor plaza area on the evening of August 26.

"There's such a strong sense of working with the community here, of bringing people into what you're doing," says Arnetia Walker of her inaugural experience as a member of the Two River family. "I'm likin' Red Bank!"

### **MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM**

**WHERE:** Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Ave. in Red Bank

**WHEN:** Preview Saturday; opens Sept. 16 and runs through Oct. 9.

**TICKETS:** \$20 to \$65, [www.tworivertheater.org](http://www.tworivertheater.org) or 732-345-1400

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