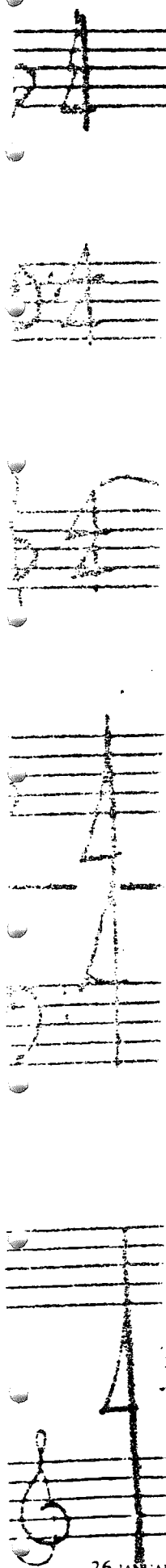


How



Equally at home with the classics and the blues, Emory composer Dwight Andrews is the musical voice of August Wilson's Pulitzer Prize-winning plays

From

B. B. King

to Broadway

and Bach

BY RHONDA WATTS

Inset in a detail of his composition "Through a Glass," Dwight Andrews poses in Broadway's Walter Kerr Theatre, where *The Piano Lesson* has been playing since April.

IN 1984 DWIGHT ANDREWS was a doctoral student in music and the minister of the Black Church at Yale. He had not envisioned a career in the theater. Then he read the script of a play by a little-known poet from Minnesota named August Wilson.

Set in a Chicago recording studio in 1927, the drama heats up as Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, the mother of the blues, makes her entrance. She is enraged. She's already had a run-in with a police officer over a minor traffic accident, and now she finds her manager has agreed to record a version of one of her tunes that has been arranged, without her approval, by a maverick bandsman, Levee.

"Irvin, what is that I hear?" storms the squat, black singer at her white manager. "What is that the band's rehearsing? I know they ain't

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rehearsing Levee's 'Black Bottom.'
I know I ain't hearing that?"

"Ma listen . . .," Irvin says, "that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Levee's version of that song . . . it's got a nice arrangement . . . a nice horn intro . . . It really picks it up . . ."

"I ain't studying Levee nothing," Ma Rainey says, interrupting. "I know what he done to that song and I don't like to sing it that way. . . . I don't care what you say, Irvin," she says. "Levee ain't messing up my song. If he got what the people want, let him take it somewhere else. I'm singing Ma Rainey's song. I ain't singing Levee's song. Now that's all there is to it."

The plot captivated Andrews, now a music faculty member at Emory. When he was offered a job as musical director of the play, he quickly accepted. As musical director, Andrews chose appropriate music to be played before, during, and after the performance. He adapted and arranged many of the sequences and composed new pieces for some scenes and transitions.

"White folks don't understand the blues. . . .

They don't understand that's life's way of talking."

— Gertrude Ma Rainey in
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

The play, with its exploration of African-American culture and of the blues, dovetailed with two of Andrews' interests. Out of the fictionalized account of legendary blues queen Madame Rainey, the playwright had carved a telling portrait of African-American culture in the twenties. Within the setting of a small recording studio, he had explored an undercurrent of racial tensions that could be felt throughout the country.

"White folks don't understand about the blues," Ma Rainey says during the play. "They hear it come out, but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life."

Since the premiere of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* at the Yale Repertory in 1984, Wilson has emerged as the most important theater voice of the eighties, and Andrews has come into his own as a musical director, working on Broadway and throughout the country. In all, Andrews has served as musical director of four Wilson dramas, including the Pulitzer Prize winners *Fences* and *The Piano Lesson*. He has also

begun directing the music of other new works, such as Atlanta's Alliance Theater production of *Miss Evers' Boys*, by David Feldshuh. As his theatrical repertoire has

grown, so has his reputation. "Dwight is an excellent musician," says Lloyd Richards, artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theater, who has worked with the composer on some twenty productions throughout the country. "He's innovative in his thinking and well grounded in all aspects of music." Kenny Leon, artistic director of the Alliance, who has also worked frequently with Andrews, says, "There are only a few people who have his expertise. He's very sought after and respected among directors."

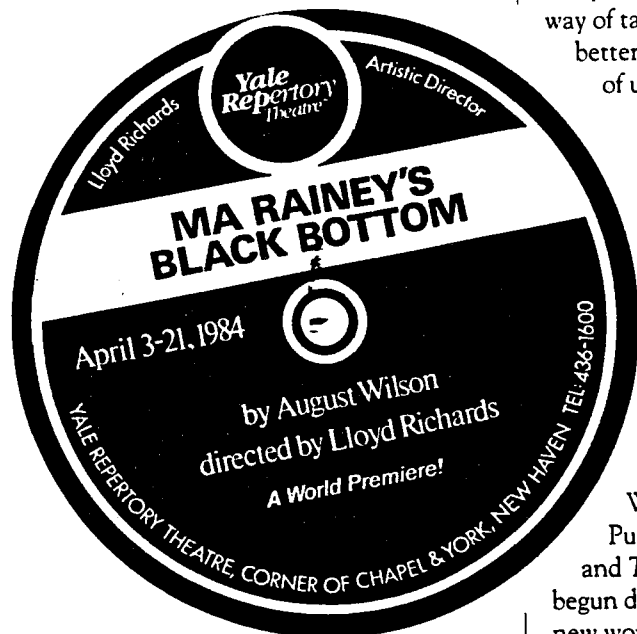
Meanwhile, Andrews hasn't neglected his other interests in composing, performing, and teaching. Last summer his composition "Through a Glass," based on a Mari Evans poem, had its world premiere at the National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta. "Scored for soprano voice . . . , piano, percussion, cello and soprano saxophone, this colorful piece pulsated with life," wrote a reviewer in the *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*. This fall Andrews conducted the recording of a new piece of music he wrote for the Barbara Feldman & Dancers Dance Company.

An accomplished musician on saxophone, clarinet, and flute, Andrews has recorded some sixteen albums. Included among the artists with whom he's both toured and recorded are Leo Smith and his band, New Delta Ahkri, and Anthony Davis and Episteme.

Undergirding all of these activities is his academic career. He's lectured at the University of Michigan and Yale and Rice universities. He's written essays on the blues and chapters on jazz for several anthologies. He serves on the editorial board of *Black Sacred Music Journal*, published by Duke University Press. At Emory, says music colleague William Ransom, "He is one of our most popular teachers."

DWIGHT ANDREWS sits in his office behind the L of a large, standard-issue desk set squarely in the midst of electronic

Courtesy Dwight Andrews



Ma Rainey's Black Bottom premiered at the Yale Repertory Theatre in 1984.

keyboards, bookshelves, and a piano laden with sheet music, boxes, and small musical instruments — a Brazilian Indian flute, a folk instrument — from Djakarta, Java. Andrews is not here often. Instead, he might be found down the hall teaching a class on music theory or ethnomusicology, at home finishing the score of a new composition, or across town attending rehearsals for a play at the Alliance. He flies to New York every month to recheck the music for *The Piano Lesson* and sometimes to Los Angeles to see a play or receive an award. He has temporarily set aside his pastoral responsibilities as a Protestant minister.

For the moment, however, Andrews appears unhurried. He is focused and thoughtful. He responds fully to questions, his voice striking a high, soft-toned pitch. Yet as he describes ongoing projects, interrupted periodically by the telephone, something becomes apparent: he does not often have this leisure, this time to just sit and talk about where he's going and where he's been.

Andrews was born in Detroit in 1951. Both his parents worked in city government, his father in the building permits division and his mother in the state employment office. As a teenager he played clarinet in the band at Cass Technical High School, a performing arts school whose alumni include singers Diana Ross and Ray Parker Jr. (of *Ghostbusters* fame). Upon graduation, Andrews entered the University of Michigan, where he received a bachelor of music education degree in 1973 and a master of music degree in 1974.

When he finished his master's degree, however, he changed directions, enrolling in divinity school at Yale. "I felt torn at the time," Andrews says, "because a career in the performing arts didn't seem to fulfill the need I felt to be socially responsible." With the encouragement of a Detroit pastor, Andrews decided to prepare for the ministry.

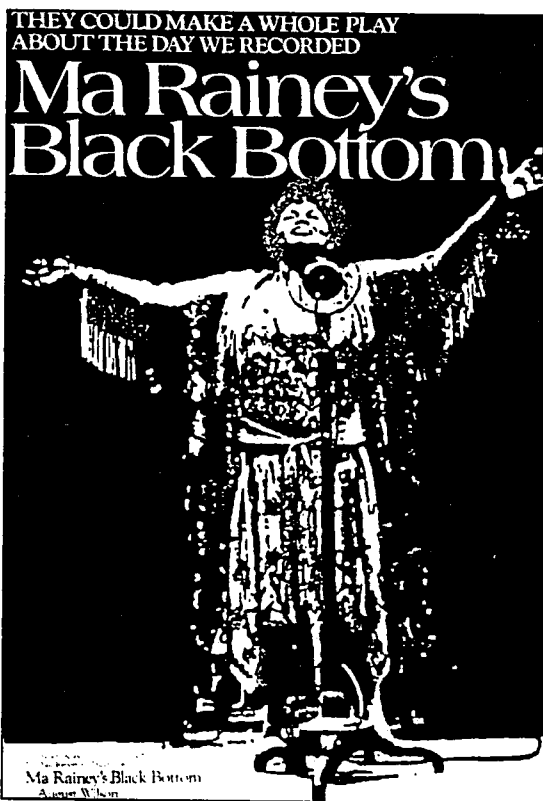
His grandparents quietly encouraged his two career paths. "My maternal grandfather was a Baptist minister

Since the premiere of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in 1984, Andrews has come into his own as a musical director.

and was very influential in my early growing up," Andrews says, "and my paternal grandmother was a professional musician and vocal coach. I think in a very quiet way they had influences on me, although I never studied with my grandmother, and I never talked church with my grandfather. I think I garnered certain things about my career choices from knowing them. Sometimes seeds are set that don't bloom until much later."

With the decision to pursue a divinity degree, Andrews thought he would have to give up music. Instead, he found he came to rely on his musical training to help support his education. To earn extra money he played gigs in the college town of New Haven, Connecticut, performing on clarinet, saxophone, or flute. He became a teaching assistant in music and Afro-American studies at Yale in 1974, advancing to acting instructor in 1976 and lecturer in 1977. In that year, he completed his master of divinity degree and was ordained by the United Church of Christ at the Plymouth Congregational Church in Detroit.

By this time Andrews was dividing his time between music and the ministry. He decided to pursue a doctoral degree in music in 1979, focusing his studies on music theory. His dissertation, on the early music of Igor Stravinsky, remains unfinished. "That's my life story," Andrews says, shaking his head.



Courtesy Dwight Andrews

From Yale, *Ma Rainey* traveled to Broadway, where it enjoyed a successful run at the Cort Theatre.

FOR THE PAST eighty years, the theater is what has come between Andrews and the completion of his doctorate. Director Lloyd Richards convinced the young pastor and musician to join the Yale Repertory as musical director in 1982. While there, Andrews worked on *Ma Rainey* in 1984 and *Fences* the following year. He left in 1986 to accept an appointment as Mellon doctoral fellow and lecturer in music theory at Rice University, only to be brought temporarily back to Yale at Wilson's request to work on a new drama, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

"Who else would I call?" Wilson had responded that year when asked why he sent for Andrews in Houston. "He does such great work. . . . I cry every time I listen to the music in *Joe Turner*."

"August needs someone who knows the musical traditions and can recreate them for the stage," Andrews says. Although the dramas are not musicals, music plays an important role, undergirding, intensifying, and sometimes completing the action. "Wilson's plays are very much like music," Andrews says. "They have a

"August Wilson's plays are very much like music," Andrews says. "They have a sensibility of the blues, satirical but having very lamenting lyrics."

sensibility of the blues, satirical but at the same time having very lamenting lyrics. You're laughing one moment and frightened the next."

Falling back on his academic training, Andrews always begins work on a new play by thoroughly researching the music of the period. After a careful reading of the script, he searches for music specifically appropriate to the show. Sometimes he arranges other composers' works to fill the amount of time specified by the writer, or he may compose a new melody suited to the situation, mood, time, and place.

"Most of the tunes in *Ma Rainey* were actual songs of hers that I reconstituted," Andrews says. "I rearranged and rerecorded them because I had to make them playable for people who were not going to be seasoned veterans. Still, they had to be essentially sound. That was the challenge, to capture the essence of those pieces."

Part of *Ma Rainey's* original success lay in the actors' credibility as musicians. On opening night the actors played their instruments live, even though none of them had been able to play at all when rehearsals began a few months earlier. The actress portraying Ma sang in a heavy contralto, pounding, sliding over, and easing through the notes made by the ensemble of piano, trombone, trumpet, and bass. "Way down south in Alabama/I got a friend they call dancing Sammy/Who's crazy about

all the latest dances/Black Bottom stomping, two babies prancing."

The heavyset woman jiggled as she crooned. "I want to see the dance you call the black bottom/I want to learn that dance." The piano player hunched over his instrument, his hands traveling naturally over the keyboard. The trumpeteer leaned backward, feeling the music. "I want to see the dance you call you big black bottom/It'll put you in a trance."

Andrews remembers that as he trained the cast, he was "a nervous wreck." But he was successful. The actors played so convincingly, wrote a critic in *Down Beat* magazine, that the music was "an added dividend to an impressive dramatic offering."

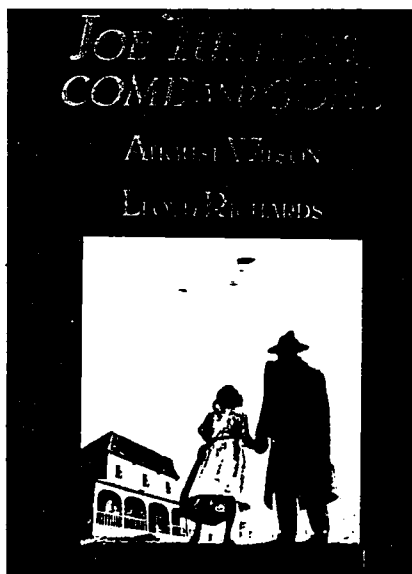
Andrews continues to fine tune the music as long as a play is in production. For *The Piano Lesson* he



Courtesy Alliance Theatre

This fall Andrews worked close to home, directing the music for Atlanta's Alliance Theatre production of *Miss Evers' Boys*, by David Feldshuh.

reworked some of his original 1987 score as recently as this fall. In the drama a spirit plays an elaborately carved, slavery-era piano, over which a brother and sister are feuding. The brother wants to sell the piano to buy land where their ancestors were slaves, but the sister wants to keep the piano as a reminder of their forebears who were sold and died for the instrument. During many of the ear-



Courtesy Dwight Andrews

"I cry every time I listen to the music in *Joe Turner*," said August Wilson of Andrews' work as musical director.

lier productions of the play in Boston, Chicago, and Washington, D.C., a prerecorded tape played offstage during the ghost's appearances. Audiences at recent performances in Los Angeles and New York heard a different version of the music, and they saw the keys on the piano move.

With Andrews' direction Will Ransom, assistant professor of piano and music theory at Emory, recorded the newest version on a disclavier, a computerized player piano, at an Atlanta Yamaha store. When the play moved last April from Los Angeles to Broadway, Andrews telephoned Ransom from New York. Could the pianist go back to the store to make a few more changes? So Ransom, in the middle of milling customers, phone to his ear, took long distance instructions from Andrews and rerecorded snippets of the music, shipping them out overnight. These ten months later, Andrews still returns frequently to New York for musical troubleshooting and refining.

The theater project that has most recently been consuming much of Andrews' time has been in Atlanta, with the Alliance production of *Miss Evers' Boys*. The play, based on the book *Bad Blood* by James H. Jones, investigates the Tuskegee Project, a

**Miss Evers' Boys is
"a frightening tale of black
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Andrews says, "men
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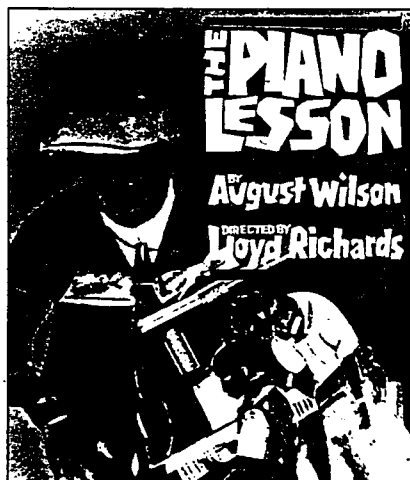
forty-year U.S. Public Health study, begun in 1932, of the effects of untreated syphilis on men in rural Alabama. Rather than ending in 1946, when penicillin was discovered to be effective in treating the disease, the project continued until 1970. "It is a frightening tale of black farmers in Alabama," Andrews says, "men who had been diagnosed with syphilis but were not treated. Their declines were systematically studied in stages. What they received for participation was a death certificate and a guaranteed burial." The play explores the relationship of four of these men and their nurse and friend, Miss Evers, who is torn between concern for them and orders from above.

Kenny Leon, who previously worked with Andrews on *Joe Turner* and *Fences*, hired the Emory professor shortly after being named the Alliance's artistic director in June 1990. "When I became artistic director, I knew I wanted him involved here," Leon says. "I hope I can take up all of his time after Emory."

ANDREWS FACES perhaps his biggest challenge yet this spring as he assumes the role of artistic director of the Alliance production of *Ma Rainey*. Leon, who had initially hired Andrews only as

musical director of the show, decided on second thought to let the composer spread his wings.

Andrews, after all, knows this play better than almost anyone. He's been involved with every major production of *Ma Rainey* from Broadway to Los Angeles. "I've seen a lot of productions, but that doesn't necessarily make me a good director," Andrews says. "It does give me the advantage



Courtesy Dwight Andrews

The Pulitzer Prize-winning play *The Piano Lesson* is the fourth Wilson drama for which Andrews has directed the music.

of knowing the play. I know that play inside and out, which is an important starting point. But the task of the director is much more complicated — which is one of the reasons I'm so excited about making this artistic move — because ultimately the director oversees the entire expression of the play to try to make one unified vision of the play speak to an audience."

Andrews sees a thread that ties his seemingly disparate projects together. "I'm a teacher," he says. "That's what I do. . . . It is a fact that the African-American experience is central to American life. Part of my work brings that message to the core. Through the plays, through teaching, through my compositions, I preach the unity of this culture and its value.



Billy Howard

In New York Andrews supervises the recording of a new composition.

"I've always thought that part of my contribution would be serving as a bridge to get all of this wonderful music and all of this wonderful culture into the main textbooks. In some ways only someone like me could make that kind of contribution, someone who not only knows but appreciates the music of Bach as well as the music of B.B. King. I'm in a unique position not only to present this music in performance but also to talk about it, discuss it, analyze it in a critical way that would probably be different from any of my predecessors or colleagues."

Andrews, who has taught such courses as Black Music in the Americas, The History of Jazz, and The Music of Igor Stravinsky, joined Emory's department of music three years ago. "I came to Emory because of what I saw as a very good department in terms of the faculty and also for the liberal arts program for undergraduates," Andrews says. "I'm more interested in teaching here than in a conservatory."

He also was attracted by an administration he perceived as "interested in moving the arts and arts education forward" and one that would value his teaching and research as well as his creative and theatrical work. "Some school administrators wouldn't allow you to do that," he says. "They want their theorists to be only theorists."

Andrews finds many prejudices in music theory that he hopes to avoid

in the classes he teaches. "Music theory is a heavily culturally biased discipline which makes certain types of presumptions about aesthetics that ultimately speak not only to Western European art but also make implications about other musics and cultures," he says. "Take the Western European concept of form, for instance. One of the tacit assumptions about a great piece of music is that it starts off with a germ or a seminal idea." Andrews sings the famous opening notes of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony — "dah, dah, dah, dum" — then continues with his explanation. "Not only does Beethoven have this one great idea, but he's able to extend that one idea into all these contrapuntal forms. Yes, true, but if we look at the music of other cultures, we notice the development is quite different." The form adopted by the traditional African drum choir, he points out as an example, develops around stasis and repetition.

By focusing on the Western concept of form and ignoring those of other cultures, Andrews says, theorists are doing other musical forms a great disservice. "What we need is a way to talk about the dynamics of progression in all of the musics that don't evolve like a sonata." In order to do that, Andrews believes musicians need to understand the form of the drum choir as well as that of the sonata.

While Andrews hopes to turn students around to his way of thinking and to inspire them to express themselves, he does not see himself as a role model. Rather than have students emulate him, he hopes the future generation will not have to work as hard to correct biases. "I would hope in future times that students would be able to be much more free to study music and art in as unbiased a way as possible," Andrews says, "based on maybe some of the contributions I might make." □

Andrews faces perhaps his biggest challenge yet as he assumes the role of artistic director of the Alliance production of *Ma Rainey*.



Billy Howard