

Alley Sparkles with Ma Rainey

by Danita Spivey

For one who has not had the opportunity to see August Wilson's play, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," or who is unfamiliar with blues singer Ma Rainey, much is left to the imagination. The imagination questions the mind for what insight might be gleaned from the title.

The production provides a glance at the life of a legendary blues singer Gertrude "Ma Rainey" Pridgett, played by Theresa Merritt, and the harsh life endured by blacks in the entertainment profession in the 1920's. The play also explores the private lives of Rainey's sideman, and the complexities their lives bring to the recording session.

August Wilson, Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, has anchored his writing career with the works of blues musicians like Bessie Smith and Gertrude "Ma Rainey" Pridgett. The blues life has inspired him to write plays like "Seven Guitars," a script about blues musicians in 1947 Pittsburgh, and "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

The play draws the audience into the multi-layered American recording industry of the 1920's. A three-floor recording studio is the setting. The audience learns that the musicians are there to take care of business to the best of their ability, then move on.

Sturdyvant, the Anglo studio owner, played by Charles Krohn, makes a clear statement in his conversation with Irvin, Ma Rainey's Anglo manager, played by James Black. "I'm holding you responsible for her...I'm not putting up with any of her shenanigans. I just want to get her in here...record those songs...and get her out."

Something much deeper unfolds with the unraveling of Ma Rainey's four sidemen. This unraveling, however, takes place in a part of the studio that has little to do with the actual recording session. It is in the cold, dark-spirited, impersonal band room located in the basement. The band room is where Wilson allows the audience to connect with the musicians and their particular lives.

Toledo, the piano player, played by Alex Allen Morris, appears as a serious,

well-learned black man. He is, however, a misinformed philosopher regardless of teaching himself to read. Toledo gained respect from the other musicians because he makes them think. His knowledge falls short not because of a lack of commitment, but because his method is faulty. Toledo sadly lacks the capacity to lead because he is frequently liable for misinterpretations, misconceptions, and nonsensical generalizations. "You ought to have learned yourself to read...then you'd understand the basic understanding of everything," says Toledo to Levee, the saucy tempered trumpet player, played by Russell Andrews.

Levee, at 30 is the youngest of the four musicians. He plays unfamiliar notes to Toledo, Slowdrag, or Cutler, because Levee feels the newer music, plus he reads and writes music. Levee is a gadfly for Toledo. Because of his personality and ill fated zest for life without limitations, Levee is the outcast of the four musicians, who view him as being ignorant and foolish. He alienates himself from the other three band members with his stereotypical comments and his repeated references to Ma Rainey's songs as "jug-band" music. He further estranges himself because he attacks the very fiber of being that the other band members can associate to typical life for blacks as sharecroppers, farmers, and wood haulers. He charges them not to be typically complacent about life as he says, "You satisfied sitting in one place. You got to move on down the road from where you sitting." This effort to alienate himself, whether intentional or inadvertent, will lead Levee to a fate he will unprepared to accept.

Cutler, the band leader, played by Thomas Martell Brimm, plays guitar and trombone, and is the most sensible of the four musicians, earning him the respect of group leader. As the band leader, he has the responsibility to make certain every aspect of the recording session, including the

rehearsal, goes exactly the way Ma has instructed.

In fulfilling this obligation he encounters opposition from Levee, who refuses to rehearse and insists on playing his own arrangements of Ma's songs. He faces opposition from Irvin, who shrewdly handles Ma's business in an effort for self gain, and who secretly gives Levee permission to use his version of the song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" for the recording session. This underhandedness is only the start of what will unfold, allowing the audience a special glance into the respect Irvin and Sturdyvant have for Ma Rainey.

Theresa Merritt plays Ma Rainey and brings Rainey's demanding personality and dictatorial will over Irvin and Sturdyvant. Rainey realizes that her only power in life is in the recording studio. She literally lowers her guard and discloses her real feelings to Cutler, her confident. "White folks try to be put out with you all the time...they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. Wanna take my voice and trap it in their fancy boxes with all their buttons and dials...[and then they] ain't got no use for me then. If you colored and can make them some money...you alright...Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley," says Ma Rainey, bitterly.

The band members, including Slow Drag, the bass player, played by Byron Wesley Jacquet, engage in frequent petty disagreements throughout the play, which provides the humor so desperately needed for the audience

to fully appreciate the conditions of that era. Their music also warrants appreciation in that it is the common ground and ultimate connector for their lives. Levee sings "When the world goes wrong and I have got the blues...Doctor Jazz...makes me get on my dancing shoes."

It is, however, Levee who loses control, bringing the final curtain call as he drives his pocket knife under Toledo's ribs, allowing darkness prevails.

Director, Claude Purdy, and the supporting cast are: the policeman, played by Patrick Mitchell; Dussie Mae, played by Renee Elise Goldsberry; and Sylvester, played by Michael Ballard—helps to bring the spirit of the music and the legend to life. "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" is currently showing at the Alley Theater, call 228-9341 for information. □



August Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom"

photo courtesy Jim Caldwell