

If August Wilson's new play, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, were a record album it would belong near the top of this year's hit parade. Filtering the story of Gertrude "Ma" Rainey—blues singer of the '20s—through his poet's imagination, Wilson has written a searing drama that is not historical on pride, self-identity and prejudice. Like many first plays by poets, its author takes a leisurely time to tell his story in the tradition of the Southern storyteller, yet he is in control at all times. As stage drama, however, the play takes a bit too long before it reaches its shattering climax. Music, poetry and wisdom of the heart are intermingled in this debut by a major new voice in the American theatre.

Lloyd Richards has assembled an ensemble cast to rival that of his other theatrical discovery, "A Raisin In The Sun," and this play should do for the careers of some of these actors what the earlier one did a generation ago.

Theresa Merritt as the dignified black singer who knows she is a party to exploitation by the white record

**MA RAINEY'S
BLACK BOTTOM**
REVIEWED BY
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company owners but demands respect through her seemingly arbitrary display of temperament, is not really the central character. The play revolves around the tension in the musicians' rehearsal room: Robert Judd as the pianist who has faced his reality but has kept his dignity; the soft-spoken trombonist (Joe Seneca) who is the nominal band leader; Leonard Jackson as the bassist who does not reveal his private wounds, and Charles S. Dutton making his Broadway debut as the young rebel Levee, the trumpeter, who is unable to live with his sense of frustration and anger. As the tension mounts, Dutton claims the leading role but, in his quiet way, Judd makes a powerful adversary.

Charles Henry McClennahan has designed a bandroom and recording studio that lives up to our expectations for a 1927 "Race Division." John Carpenter and Lou Criscuolo are frighteningly real as the studio owner and Ma's manager, respectively. Though not bigots, they see to it that Ma and her musicians do not get ahead. In smaller roles, Scott Davenport-Richards as Ma's stuttering nephew and Aleta Mitchell as her "girl" are effective in their big scenes. Credit must go to musical director Dwight Andrews if it was, indeed, he who prepared his actors so well to play their on-stage blues. Attention must be paid to playwright August Wilson who has turned a musical form into an expression of theatrical anguish.

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," The Yale Repertory Theatre Production presented by Ivan Bloch, Robert Cole, Frederick M. Zollo, at the Cort Theatre, 138 W. 48th St. Opened Oct. 11 for an open run.