



BERT ANDREWS

STUDIO SCENE: Pictured principals from the cast of Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom* include (standing from left) Scott Davenport-Richards, Charles S. Dutton, Leonard Jackson, Theresa Merritt, Robert Judd, and Joe Seneca with (above from left) Lou Criscuolo and John Carpenter.

Rainey's rage staged

NEW YORK—August Wilson's play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, now enjoying a successful run at the Cort Theatre on Broadway, wrenches the heart while it reminds us that rage inwardly directed is perhaps the most destructive of human emotions.

Wilson's powerful drama, vividly directed by Lloyd Richards, asserts that racism and the economic exploitation of black performers—in this case blues singer Ma Rainey and her backing musicians—often reduces perpetrator and victim to one and the same.

Set in a Chicago recording studio in 1927, *Black Bottom's* key character is trumpet player Levee, a young, slick maverick who not only wants to modernize Ma's "jug-band music" and form his own band, but who also openly disavows the sense of resignation and powerlessness expressed by the other bandmembers. Levee feels that he, and probably he alone, knows how to negotiate his place in the white world, and that the other bandmembers represent an old order unwilling to move with the times.

It is Levee and his many confrontational episodes—with Ma, with each of his bandmates, with the white owner of the recording studio, and ultimately with his own dreams and memories set against the frustrations of being black in America—which fuel the incendiary action. Charles S. Dutton plays Levee, and his performance is riveting.

Theresa Merritt as Ma Rainey,

the "Mother of the Blues," is an imperial singing star, a despot in the studio, who understands all too well that once the white folks get her voice recorded, "Its like if I'd been some kind of whore and they roll over and put their pants on." Ma knows how debilitating and murderous the system is, yet her awareness alone cannot possibly renew her dashed hopes or those of her musicians.

The band members—played by Leonard Jackson, Robert Judd and, the night I saw the production, understudy Bill Cobbs—exhibit an on-stage camaraderie that, even in the face of adversarial bantering, posits a collective "us-vs.-them" sentiment so central to their characters' survival. As they taunt and chide each other in a loose, almost improvisatory manner, it becomes clear that the actors are as interdependent and as group-oriented as a seasoned jazz ensemble.

Interestingly, the music performed in the show—effectively woven through the story and staged with an ear towards dramatic tension and release—is played live by the actors themselves and bolstered with pre-recorded tapes. Much credit belongs to Dwight Andrews, who not only designed and structured the musical sequences, but who insisted, for authenticity's sake, that the actors also learn to play their instruments. They do so convincingly, which, as it turns out, is an added dividend to an impressive dramatic offering. —Jeff Levenson