

FROM
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MESSENGER

For 'Ma Rainey's' return, Lewis lights a slow fuse

But play's power still comes across

By Mike Giuliano

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(Enlarge) E. Faye Butler plays an estimable blues singer with a beautiful traveling companion (Toccarrá Cash, above right) in the new production of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," continuing at Centerstage, in Baltimore, through May 9. (Photo by Richard Anderson)

Theater review

Almost all of the action in August Wilson's "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" occurs in the spirited banter exchanged by musicians waiting to do a recording session in Chicago in 1927. The late playwright had such a great ear for dialogue that he's able to make it seem like these are real guys really shooting the breeze at Centerstage.

There's a lot going on sociologically, of course, because these black men live in a racially segregated society. Indeed, they are cutting the record for a white-owned company that pays them so little that they probably could make as much working as sharecroppers down south.

As if Jim Crow-era social practices weren't bad enough, these guys have enough internal disputes to keep them tense. And

then there is the imperious blues singer they're accompanying, Ma Rainey, whose shouting is not confined to song lyrics.

Wilson wrote a play set in each decade of the 20th century, with "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" standing out as the only one not set in Pittsburgh. It also stands out because its title character was a real historical figure, which tends to give the play a docu-drama quality.

Yet another thing that sets it apart is that most of Wilson's plays introduce supernatural elements to varying degrees, but "Ma Rainey" qualifies as straightforward naturalism.

When Centerstage first staged this play in 1990, the realistic set design placed us within a shabby recording studio in Chicago in the '20s. The set design for the current production is quite different.

The sparsely appointed stage suggests a studio, but the props don't consist of much more than a piano, a few chairs, a microphone, and an elevated booth from which the white managers bark orders.

What dominates this abstracted set design by Riccardo Hernandez are the numerous titles for such songs as "Georgia Cake Walk" and "Booze and Blues" that are printed on a looming back wall and also on a panel suspended overhead. It's an eye-catching design in its own right, but only superficially reminds us of a rich musical legacy.

If that set is mildly distracting, it becomes a moot point once the banter begins in earnest. The Journeymen players are Cutler (David Fonteno), Toledo (Thomas Jefferson Byrd), Slow Drag (Ernest Perry, Jr.) and Levee (Maurice McRae).

By turns humorous and acrimonious, their exchanges are at the heart of the play. Lived-in performances make it a pleasure to eavesdrop on their leisurely exchanges as they await the arrival of Ma Rainey.

Also worthwhile are the exchanges with their white manager, Irvin (Merwin Goldsmith), and the white recording studio owner, Sturdyvant (Laurence O'Dwyer). These labor-management conversations are polite on the surface, but with tenser emotions percolating just beneath the surface.

It's well into the first act before the fur coat-clad Ma Rainey (E. Faye Butler) comes sweeping into the studio. She's accompanied by her nephew, Sylvester (Ro Boddie), whose severe stutter does not hinder Ma's intention that he recite a line as the preface to one song; and she's also traveling with a beautiful young woman, Dussie Mae (Toccarrá Cash), for whom Ma is more than just a surrogate mother of sorts.

Provided you don't require an incident-packed narrative, this play is a wonderful immersion in the personalities and issues of that now-distant era. It's a long play that merits sticking around, because Wilson masterfully develops his themes before they eventually explode in the second act.

If this production only sporadically realizes its explosive potential, it's for reasons unrelated to the

abstracted set design. E. Faye Butler has proved herself to be a formidable stage presence at this theater before, with plays including "Dinah Was" and "Ain't Misbehavin'." She obviously has the force-of-nature personality to play Ma Rainey, but her virtually non-stop shouting makes it seem like she's coasting. There are depths of emotion in the scripted character that don't come across in a performance that goes for guaranteed crowd-pleasing gestures.

The other main thing hindering the production is that director Irene Lewis allows the pacing to lag during several scenes in the second act. There is a character named Slow Drag, but there is no need for the play to become a slow drag. Conversational exchanges that should crackle tend to crawl. The ponderous pace hurts, but fortunately, the play's power still comes across.

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" runs through May 9 at Centerstage, at 700 N. Calvert St., in Baltimore. Tickets are \$10 to \$60. Call 410-332-0033 or go to www.centerstage.org.

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