



MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

By **AUGUST WILSON**

Directed by Ron OJ Parson

September 17 – October 18, 2009

at Court Theatre

-STUDY GUIDE-

ABOUT THE PLAY

CHARACTERS

Ma Rainey

- Based on Ma Rainey, a famous blues singer
- Hailed as “mother of the blues”
- Decision-maker for the band – in charge of everything that happens
- Has no illusions about the fact that her manager and producer are trying to make money off of her

Mel Sturdyvant

- White owner of the South Side recording studio where the play takes place
- Overworked, penny-pinching, obsessed with making money
- Uncomfortable dealing with black performers; communicates primarily with and through Irvin, Ma’s white manager
- Represents white exploitation of black music

Irvin

- Ma Rainey’s white agent
- Spends most of his time dealing with conflict between Ma and Sturdyvant
- Chiefly motivated by money, but seems to enjoy spending time with Ma and the band
- Acts as a liaison between white characters (Sturdyvant, police officers) and black characters (Ma, the band)

Cutler

- Guitar and trombone player in Ma’s band
- Leader of the instrumentalists
- Loner, in his mid-fifties
- Plays his music straight with no embellishment, believes in getting things done quickly



Slow Drag

- Slow-moving but talented bass player in Ma's band
- In his mid-fifties, professional who is focused on his music
- Name comes from an incident in which he slow-danced with a woman for hours to win money
- Critics have said that Slow Drag's playing reflects 'fundamental rhythmic, harmonic and melodic nuances' found in African music

Toledo

- Piano player in Ma's band
- Literate and most reflective of the band members
- Believes that style and musicianship are important to performance
- Discusses abstract concepts such as racial memory and the plight of the black man throughout the play, but is taken literally by other band members when trying to make philosophical points through storytelling
- Lost his wife and children in a divorce

Levee

- Talented but temperamental trumpet player in Ma's band
- Youngest band member – in his early thirties – and prides himself on his appearance, especially his expensive shoes
- Wants to put his own band together and record his own songs, and thinks that Sturdyvant will help him
- Plays his own version of the song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," which is faster and more swung than the other band members would like
 - Frustrated, bitter, picks fights with all of the band members, tries to seduce Dussie Mae with little success
 - Witnessed his mother being raped by a gang of white men as a child



Court Theatre costume rendering – "Levee"

Sylvester Brown

- Ma's nephew
- Built "like an Arkansas fullback," has a stutter
- Person whom Ma insists introduce her song, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," on the recording around which the play centers, despite his stutter, which causes a fight at the recording studio

Dussie Mae

- Ma Rainey's beautiful young female lover
- Opportunistic, flaunts her assets
- Deferential to Ma but kisses Levee when she is alone with him and promises to be his woman if he gets his own band together



Court Theatre costume rendering – "Dussie Mae"

PLOT OVERVIEW

The play opens in a South Side Chicago recording studio where Ma Rainey's band – Cutler, Toledo, Slow Drag, and Levee – wait to record a new album. They banter, tell stories, joke, philosophize and argue as they wait for Ma to arrive; as the play unfolds, however, it becomes clear that there is tension between Levee, the young, hot-headed trumpeter who dreams of having his own band, and Cutler and Toledo, veteran players who think Levee has a great deal to learn about music and the world.

By the time Ma Rainey finally arrives (in full regalia, entourage in tow), the group has fallen behind schedule, and Ma's insistence that her stuttering nephew Sylvester perform the intro to the title song throws white producers Sturdyvant and Irvin into

increasingly irate disarray. While the band waits for various technical problems to be resolved, the conflict between Levee and Cutler reaches a boiling point and violence ensues. Ma then fires Levee for his insubordination, at which point Sturdyvant informs him that he will no longer be allowed to record his songs at the studio. Levee, overcome by anger, responds by fatally stabbing Toledo, thus destroying his future.



Court Theatre set model – Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

CHICAGO'S SOUTH SIDE IN THE 1920'S

The South Side of Chicago has been a fertile site for creative energy for many decades, from the fiction of Upton Sinclair, James T. Farrell, and Richard Wright to the poetry of Gwendolyn Brooks, the paintings of Archibald Motley, Jr., the sculpture of Lorado Taft and Henry Moore, the gospel music of Thomas A. Dorsey and Mahalia Jackson, and the blues of Muddy Waters.

Neighborhoods developed south of the Loop as early as the 1850s. After the Great Fire of 1871, the South Side expanded quickly as both the rich and the poor left the city's center.

The late 1860s and 1870s also saw the movement of industry away from the Loop. In 1865 the Union Stock Yard opened in Lake Township, south and west of downtown Chicago.

The Pullman Palace Car Company brought its plant and model city to Hyde Park Township in 1880. One year later Illinois Steel began operations at its massive South Works in South Chicago, also in Hyde Park Township.

Chicago annexed both of these townships to the city in 1889, creating much of the South Side in the process.

South Side African American residents and institutions date back to the decades preceding the Civil War, although a concentrated settlement emerged only toward the end of the nineteenth century. More growth took place between World War I and the 1920s, when new employment opportunities in northern industry opened the doors for what came to be known as the Great Migration.

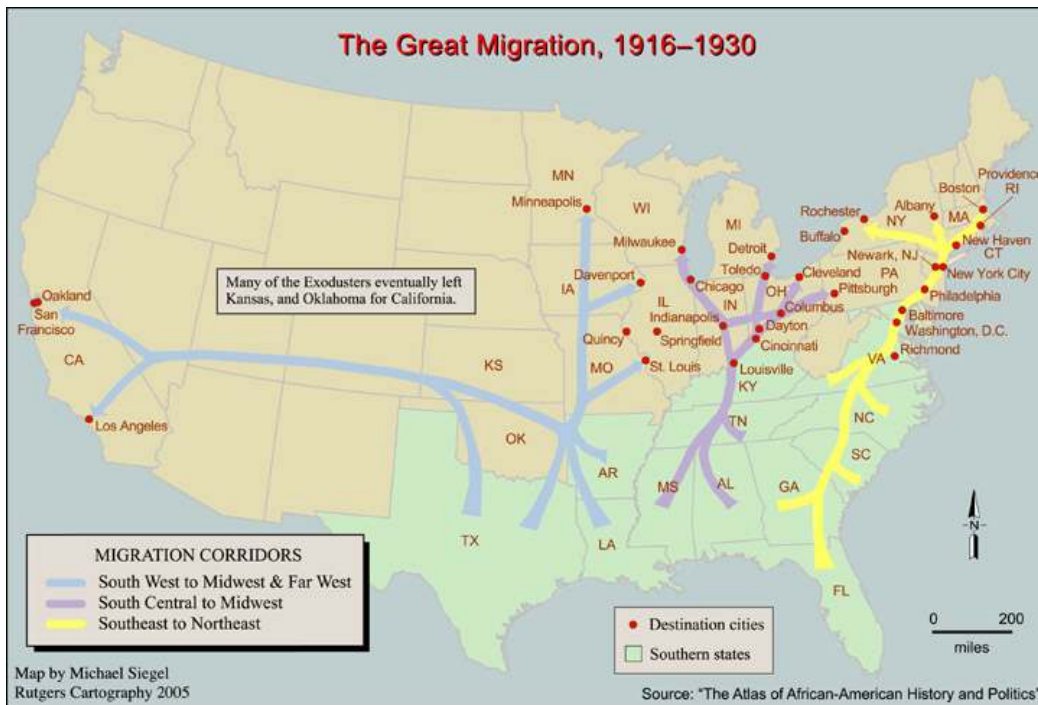


A typical South Side African American neighborhood in the 1920's: 48th and Champlain c. 1925

THE GREAT MIGRATION

Between 1916 and 1919, half a million blacks left the South for industrialized cities in the Midwest and Northeast in a historical now known as “the Great Migration.” While blacks had been trickling out of the South since Emancipation, the size of the Great Migration was unprecedented and changed overnight the racial landscape of the United States.

During this time, the African-American population in Chicago exploded from 44,103 to 233,903. The blacks who migrated to Chicago were attracted by new, unprecedented job opportunities created by the Great War (1914–1918), jobs which represented the first



real good reason for many black families to leave their homes in the South where many of them had stayed after they or their parents were emancipated from slavery. The black community was transformed in a matter of years from a small inconsequential presence to the full-blooded political, cultural and economic community that it remains today. Blacks settled primarily on the South Side of the city in the “Black Belt,” a narrow strip of the city’s grid that expanded southward and then eastward along State Street. They were surrounded by working-class Irish neighborhoods to the west and affluent middle class-neighborhoods to the east. However, black Chicagoans faced racism and violence— several black churches and homes were bombed regularly by whites who feared encroachment on their neighborhoods. There was much resentment from working-class whites who feared their jobs were at

risk. Growing tension and unrest finally came to a head with the 1919 race riot, caused by the drowning of a black boy in a white beach near the 29th Street shore of Lake Michigan. In spite of these setbacks, the tide of Migration was irreversible. By 1927, the date of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, the Chicago black community had established itself as a sequestered but thriving part of the city.

THE RECORDING INDUSTRY OF THE 1920'S: WHITE APPROPRIATION OF BLACK ART

By the 1920s, the music industry was centered in Chicago, with its clubs, live jazz radio broadcasts, and numerous recording studios. Beginning around 1914, leading jazz players gravitated towards Chicago, and the influx was sped by the closure of New Orleans' fabled Storyville district in 1917 at which time many off jazz's innovators headed north in search of work.

Paramount Records was an outgrowth of the Wisconsin Chair Company, a furniture company based in Port Washington, Wisconsin. The company first started producing records as a tactic to promote the sale of phonographs, with every purchaser getting between five and ten free disks. They started importing masters from Europe when they noticed there was a demand for German-language music, and then tried to record artists with a more popular appeal. However, they could not compete with larger companies, and so in 1922, two years after Mamie Smith became the first African-American woman to be recorded, they launched a series of "race music" that comprised about a third of their recordings and became their claim to success. These records were aimed at black consumers and advertised in black newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, the *Pittsburgh Courier*, and the *Baltimore African-American*. Because most of the retail outlets for records had limiting contracts with the major record companies that did not allow them to sell other company's records, Paramount offered their records through mail order or independent dealers.

Richard M. Jones came from New Orleans and owned a music store in Chicago, and was instrumental in bringing together artists and record companies. The store was a hangout for black musicians, and Jones would recommend artists, including Ma Rainey, to various record companies.

Many singers and songwriters were more interested in cash-in-hand than

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLUES

- The Blues originated as a form of music combining the tonality of African-American work songs with European-derived harmonic structures and ballads.
- The structure of the blues became defined in the years before WWI, generally taking a twelve-bar, three-line pattern that reflected the couplet-and-refrain in ballads as well as the call-and-response nature of work songs on the cotton fields.
- Early blues songs often had certain unifying verses, but were flexible enough to allow individual singers free treatment.
- While the themes of ballads were often about heroes or distant events, blues were about the singers themselves and the conditions and emotions of their lives.
- Blues was a state of mind, a way of working unhappiness out of one's system through song. Frederick Douglass wrote, "Slaves sing to make themselves happy rather than to express their happiness through singing." The blues do not arise from a mood, but produce one.

royalties, allowing recording managers to pay them outright and then capitalize on the situation by copyrighting the artists' songs in their own name.

- Artists were generally paid \$25 to \$50 per title, accompanists receiving \$5 to \$10. Best-selling artist received \$75 to \$200 per recorded side.
- Ma Rainey was paid \$200 per side at the height of her career, and quit the company when they wanted to reduce it to \$100. In contrast, Al Jolson, a white performer of jazz, blues, and ragtime, was paid \$10,000 per record in 1924.

New artists and material were found in Chicago through venues like Jones' music store, as well as scouted in cities and small towns in the South by recording directors and independent scouts. Recording directors were generally more interested in the songs than the singers. They would bring in singers to audition, and then pay them for the songs if they thought they were more suited to one of their other artists. Independent writers were paid \$50 to \$60 per title, but composers that already worked for Paramount (usually the performers themselves) were only paid between \$5 and \$10. The majority of scouts and directors were white, with the exception of J. Mayo Williams, a black scout who was instrumental in recording many of Paramount's top musicians.

Ma Rainey's Life

The themes of the Classic Blues revolve around pathological relationships between men and women, revenge, despair, sex, and the everyday push for survival. While the blues are associated with misery and oppression, its lyrics are often also exuberantly satirical and raunchy, and the female blues singers demonstrate a strong-willed defiance and courage against the wrongs of their situations and their men.

Ma Rainey was the most popular theater blues-singer of the early 20's, known for her husky, powerful voice, commanding stage presence, and ability to capture the pains and joys of black Southern life in her songs. Ma – or Gertrude Pridgett, as was her given name – was born in 1886 in Columbus, Georgia and first appeared on stage at 14 as part of a local talent show called *Bunch of Blackberries*. Four years later she married Will "Pa" Rainey, a traveling musician and comedian, and by the early 1910's, the couple was touring together on the minstrelsy circuit with the Rabbit Foot Minstrels, billed as "Ma & Pa Rainey, Assassins of the Blues."

Pa died in the late 1910's, by which time Ma had become a star in her own right and continued to tour until 1921. During this time, Ma worked on at least two traveling shows with the younger Bessie Smith, for whom she acted as a mentor and possibly even a lover. Bessie was known to be bisexual and it is strongly suspected that Ma was as well. Some claim that Ma taught Bessie how to sing, though Maud Smith, Bessie's sister-in-law, says that, "She was more like a mother to her."

In 1923, Ma won a recording contract with Paramount Records and went to Chicago to make her first recordings. Richard M. Jones, a talent scout for various record companies, recalls that the first recording session had to be delayed a week because Ma, unaccustomed to Northern winters, refused to go out in the snow. During her five year contract with Paramount, Ma made a total of 92 records. In 1939, at the age of 53, Ma died of heart disease.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

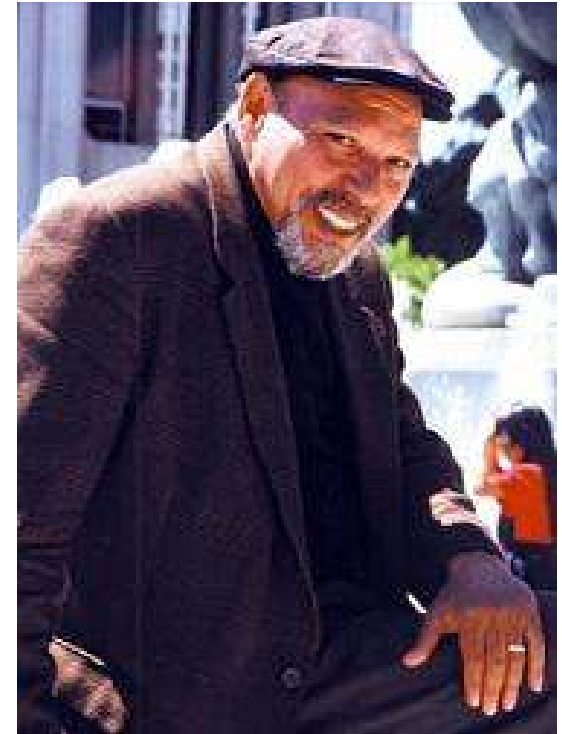
August Wilson (April 27, 1945 – October 2, 2005) was an American playwright. His literary legacy is the ten play series, **The Pittsburgh Cycle** (also known as **The Century Cycle**), for which he received two Pulitzer Prizes for Drama. Each play in the cycle is set in a different decade, depicting the comic and tragic aspects of the African American experience in the twentieth century.

Wilson was born Frederick August Kittel, Jr. in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the fourth of six children to German immigrant baker, Frederick August Kittel, Sr. and Daisy Wilson, an African American cleaning woman, from North Carolina. His mother raised the children alone by the time he was five in a two-room apartment above a grocery store at 1727 Bedford Avenue. The economically depressed neighborhood in which he was raised was inhabited predominantly by black Americans and Jewish and Italian immigrants. Wilson's mother was remarried to David Bedford in the 1950's when he was a teen, and the family moved from the Hill to the then predominantly white working class neighborhood, Hazelwood, where they encountered racial hostility and were soon forced out.

Wilson was the only African American student at the Central Catholic High School in 1959 before he was driven away by threats and abuse. He then attended Connelley Vocational High School, but found the curriculum unchallenging. He dropped out of Gladstone High School in the 9th grade in 1960 after his teacher accused him of plagiarizing a 20-page paper he wrote on Napoleon I of France. Wilson hid his decision from his mother because he did not want to disappoint her. At the age of 16, he began working menial jobs and that allowed him to meet a wide variety of people, some of whom he later based his characters on, such as Sam in *The Janitor* (1985).

By this time, Wilson knew that he wanted to be a writer, but this created tension with his mother, who wanted him to become a lawyer. She forced him to leave the family home and he enlisted in the United States Army for a three-year stint in 1962, but left after one year and went back to working various odd jobs as a porter, short-order cook, gardener, and dishwasher.

August Kittel changed his name to August Wilson to honor his mother after his father's death in 1965. That same year he bought his first typewriter for \$10.00.



In 1978 Wilson moved to St. Paul, Minnesota at the suggestion of his friend director Claude Purdy, who helped him secure a job writing educational scripts for the Science Museum of Minnesota. In 1980 he received a fellowship for the Minneapolis Playwrights Center. Wilson had a long association with the Penumbra Theatre Company of St Paul, which gave the premieres of some Wilson plays.

Wilson's best-known plays are *Fences* (1985) (which won a Pulitzer Prize and a Tony Award), *The Piano Lesson* (1990) (a Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award), *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*.

In 1994 Wilson left St Paul for Seattle, where he would develop a relationship with Seattle Repertory Theatre. Seattle Rep would ultimately be the only theater in the country to produce all of the works in his ten-play cycle and his one-man show *How I Learned What I Learned*.

Wilson succumbed to liver cancer on October 2, 2005 and passed away in Seattle at the age of 60.

Obituary: August Wilson, Pittsburgh playwright who chronicled black experience

Monday, October 03, 2005

By Christopher Rawson, *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*

Last December, Pittsburgh-born playwright August Wilson's thoughts turned to mortality. With his 60th birthday approaching, he said, "There's more [life] behind me than ahead. I think of dying every day. ... At a certain age, you should be prepared to go at any time."

In May, he was diagnosed with liver cancer and the next month his doctors determined it was inoperable. But he showed that he was indeed prepared, telling the Post-Gazette in August, "I've lived a blessed life. I'm ready."

The end came yesterday morning when Mr. Wilson, 60, died in Swedish Medical Center in Seattle, "surrounded by his loved ones," said Dena Levitin, his assistant.

Mr. Wilson took a characteristically wry look at his fate, saying, "It's not like poker; you can't throw your hand in." He also noted that when his long-time friend and producer, Benjamin Mordecai, the only person to work with him on all 10 of his major plays, died this spring, the obituary in *The New York Times* included a picture of him and Mordecai together. "That's what gave God this idea," he said.

The fierce poignancy of his eulogy for Mr. Mordecai in a recent American Theatre magazine sounds self-reflexive: "How do we transform loss? ... Time's healing balm is essentially a hoax. ... Haunted by the specter of my own death, I find solace in Ben's life." Mr. Wilson also told the *Post-Gazette* in August, "I'm glad I finished the cycle," referring to the unprecedented series of 10 plays with

which he conquered the American theater. In the process, he opened new avenues for black artists, changed the way theater approaches race and changed the business of theater, too.

Often called the Pittsburgh Cycle because all but one play is set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh where Mr. Wilson spent his youth and early adulthood, this unequalled epic chronicles the tragedies and aspirations of African Americans in a play set in each decade of the 20th century.

In dramatizing the glory, anger, promise and frustration of being black in America, he created a world of the imagination. Critics from Manhattan to Los Angeles now speak knowingly of "Pittsburgh's Hill District," not just the Hill as it is now or was when Mr. Wilson grew up in the '50s, but August Wilson Country -- the archetypal northern urban black neighborhood, a construct of frustration, nostalgia, anger and dream.

Mr. Wilson's plays present this world as a crucible in which the identity of black America has been shaped.

"While his death was not unexpected, it's a serious blow to the entire theatrical community in the United States and Pittsburgh in particular," said Ted Pappas, artistic and executive director of the Pittsburgh Public Theater, which has staged most of Wilson's work. "August Wilson is one of the seminal figures of 20th century dramatic art. When we speak of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, we will now add the name of August Wilson to that pantheon."

Asked for his own greatest accomplishment, he said he would like to be known as "the guy who wrote these 10 plays."



Portrait of Ma Rainey

The Pittsburgh Cycle

Wilson's "Pittsburgh Cycle," also often referred to as his "Century Cycle," consists of ten plays, only one of which – *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* – is set on the South Side of Chicago. As a whole, the plays aim to encapsulate the Black experience in the 20th century.

The Pittsburgh Cycle

- 1900s - *Gem of the Ocean* (2003)
- 1910s - *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1984)
- 1920s - *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1982)
- 1930s - *The Piano Lesson* (1989) - Pulitzer Prize
- 1940s - *Seven Guitars* (1995)
- 1950s - *Fences* (1985) - Pulitzer Prize
- 1960s - *Two Trains Running* (1990)
- 1970s - *Jitney* (1983)
- 1980s - *King Hedley II* (2001)
- 1990s - *Radio Golf* (2005)



Ma Rainey and Her Band

DISCUSSION & FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS

- Is Ma Rainey a feminist character? Why or why not?
- Power plays a big role in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Who really has the power at each point in the play, and how do they get it? What 'power plays' are made throughout the story, and are they successful?
- Ma believes that "only black people understand the blues." Do you agree with this statement? Why or why not?
- Ma's band members have difficulty communicating with one another. If you had to analyze and solve their communication problems, what would you recommend?
- Many of the characters, including Levee, Slow Drag and Toledo, tell personal stories throughout the play that have little to do with the actual plot. What purpose does this serve, and why did Wilson include it?
- What is the significance of attire in the play (for example, Levee's shoes)? What role does it play?
- Music is used as a way to encapsulate a culture and a time period in the play. Describe a time when modern music accomplished this in your life, and explain why it was able to do so.