



Black Rep opens with August Wilson classic drama

Courtesy of The Black Repertory Theatre



Kudos to the cast and crew for the Black Repertory Theatre of Kansas City as they end their COVID hiatus with the August Wilson blockbuster play, “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.”

In his pre-curtain welcome, Damron Russell Armstrong explained his excitement to back in live theatre and to be presenting another August Wilson work. Just prior to the hiatus, he presented another Wilson play, “How I Learned What I Learned.”

“Ma Rainey” centers on a recording session in a two-set stage-the studio and a basement rehearsal space. The play opens with the record producer and Ma Rainey’s agent setting the studio and sound for the contrary Blues diva and her band—including a

new addition, Levee, who writes music and arrangements.

Tension begins with the first words as the producer and agent discuss difficulty with past encounters with Ma. The encounter foreshadows impending conflicts among producer, agent, Levee, and Ma. With strong performances the impending conflicts and chaos pull the viewers into the play. With the audience being so close to the action, the intimacy adds another dimension to the play.

Wilson's dialogue snares the audience with joking, jabs, and banter among the band members in the rehearsal portion of the set. Audience laughter throughout most of the first act sets the stage for the rising tension and second act drama. What the audience does not know is what and how the fuse lights and the explosion erupts.

Like other August Wilson plays, the focus and heart develop through the relationships of the characters. Talented actors when given such rich words create memorable characters. In this case, "Ma Rainey" gives most characters a wide brush to color their performances.

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" comes to life with a stunning cast who make each character believable. Even the small parts come with opportunities to shine. Such care by the playwright to conjure realistic characters ensures that actors have opportunities to stand out. The cast and director did a beautiful job with this piece.

According to director Armstrong, the stunning costumes for Ma Rainey and Dussie Mae are to the credit of Eboni Fondren and April Madden. Cast member Brad Shaw costumed the men. The costumes gave added depth to the production

For "Ma Rainey," The Black Rep. produced their current offering at the home of Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre in The Warwick Theatre at 40th and Main Street, Kansas City, MO. A fresh layer of blacktop and paint replaced the former parking

area just to the north and in back of the theatre. Because of construction work on Main, normal, street-parking is not available.

As a result of COVID, the MET and the Black Rep adhere to current regulations for patron safety. Proof of vaccination and a separate means of identification are required to enter The Warwick. Once inside, masks and social distancing are required to keep patrons safe. Masks are to be worn throughout the production.

Eboni Fondren as Ma Rainey commands the stage with each entrance and holds the audience throughout her scenes. As the Mother of the Blues, her vocal offerings stand out in Act II. Fondren's sultry alto range is as smooth and tantalizing as home-made chocolate pudding. She possesses a voice that sounds like the outstanding Blues singers of the past. Move over Bessie Smith and Lady Day. Ma Rainey competes with you via Eboni Fondren's velvety-rich voice. Wow!

The band, as they tell their stories and banter give the structure to the play. Their interactions in the opening act set the stage for the ensuing drama. Granvile O'Neal leads the band and his lines and interaction with others drives the first act. Brad Shaw as the piano man gives the sage advice from the playwright as his character is the more serious of the quartet. Shaw introduces the drama that develops later in the play. Stephonne Singleton portrays Slow Drag, a nickname given as a testament to his sexuality. His lines and character add some laughs and keep the focus moving from character to character. The final member of the band is a horn player who writes and arranges music. Masterfully played by Robert Vardiman as Levee, he mixes humor and rage as the story builds. Levee's story details the trama he witnessed as perpetrated by a gang of white men.

With the band telling their stories—some with humor, others with pain—Wilson advances his story of black life prior to the

the current situation. Any weakness of the cast would damage the structure of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Great casting by the director ensures the story and all of the pain confronts the audience head on.

If looking for a villain, look no further than Greg Butell's producer character. He's all about the money. To hell with everyone else as long as he gets what he wants. The part allows Butell's portrayal to serve as a catalyst to ensuing problems. As Butell's punching bag, Colin Fewell takes on the role of the problem-solver and yes man to the boss. Fewell, as Irvin, trouble-shoots the encounters with the producer and Ma. He is the glue that string together Ma Rainey, the band, and the producer. Without his part the show would not have the tie that binds the characters together.

Even the smaller parts in "Ma Rainey" move the story along. The officer shows the treatment of persons of color. The nephew with a stuttering problem brings out the tender side of Ma as she encourages him to relax and keep trying. Dussie Mae might trigger some problems with Levee. There are so many flashpoints built in this play that the audience never knows which one ignites a bombshell.

Credit the director for his selections in casting and celebrate the actors who deserved their opening night standing ovation. The cast is: Eboni Fondren as Ma Rainey; Brad Shaw as Toledo' Granvile O'Neal as Cutler; Garrett Washington as Sylvester; Robert Vardiman as Levee; Greg Butell as Sturdyvant; Ronald Meyer as Officer; Meredith Wolfe as Dussie Mae; Colin Fewell as Irvin; Stephonne Singleton as Slow Drag.

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" welcomes audiences back to live theatre. The Black Rep, again, presents one of America's strongest playwright's plays with a strong messages and stories that need to be told. Armstrong said that the stories of black America need to be told, seen, and heard, so The Black Rep focuses on providing voice and opportunities to

achieve that end. Bravo!

Tags: Black Repertory Theatre of Kansas City, Kansas City, Theatre, Kansas City Theatre, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, August Wilson, The Warwick Theatre, Metropolitan Ensemble Theatre