

August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* on Netflix: The blues is "life's way of talking"

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Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, currently available on Netflix, is an adaptation of August Wilson's 1984 play of the same title. It depicts an explosive recording session featuring the titular blues singer, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey (1886–1939), and her band in 1927 Chicago.

The film begins with an emotionally electric opening sequence: two young black men are seen running through the woods in the Deep South, as dogs bark menacingly in the distance. The viewer wonders if they may be in danger, until the camera pans up to reveal they are hurrying to attend a performance by "Mother of the Blues" Ma Rainey (powerfully portrayed by Viola Davis). We hear Ma Rainey's "Deep Moaning Blues" played over a montage of still photographs coming to life, depicting the Great Migration of black workers from the Jim Crow South to the industrial centers in the North. Finally, Rainey's voice crescendos as we follow her from a relatively small venue in Georgia to a packed theater in Chicago.

The drama shifts to a recording studio owned by Mel Sturdyvant (Jonny Coyne), where Rainey and her band are set to cut a record. Rainey is late, and the band sets up to practice until she arrives.

Conflict simmers between veteran bandmates Cutler (Colman Domingo), Toledo (Glynn Turman), Slow Drag (Michael Potts) and the young, hotheaded Levee (Chadwick Boseman, in his final performance). Levee is impatient with Ma's style of music, believing it to be old-fashioned and not "what the people want." He has dreams of forming his own band, becoming a star like Ma, in order to "make the white man respect" him, which the other bandmates dismiss as mere empty talk.

Ma arrives with her nephew Sylvester (Dusan Brown) and her young lover Dussie Mae (Taylour Paige) in tow. Ma's presence immediately dominates the situation. She demands that everything is done "her way," at one point refusing to even begin the recording until she receives

bottles of Coca-Cola. Over the objections of both the band and Ma's manager Irvin (Jeremy Shamos), Ma insists that Sylvester speak the intro to her song "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," even though the boy struggles with a stutter.

Levee gives some of his original music to Sturdyvant, hoping to set up a recording session of his own. When the other bandmates mock Levee for his servile behavior toward the white Sturdyvant, Levee erupts at them. He relates a story about a horrific attack on his mother by a gang of white men during his childhood in the South, and the revenge that his father sought. "That taught me how to handle them," he says. "I can smile and say 'yessir' to whoever I please. I got my time coming to me."

Tempers flare as Ma's and Levee's personalities and musical styles come into conflict. As tensions reach a boiling point, Levee ultimately lashes out in an act with tragic consequences.

An undoubtedly gifted playwright, Wilson (1945-2005) was a major figure in American theater for nearly four decades. The settings of his plays—a "jitney," or unlicensed taxi cab station (*Jitney*), a small restaurant in Pittsburgh's Hill District (*Two Trains Running*), the family home of a sanitation worker (*Fences*)—reveal an interest in the lives of working class "everymen." His characters, in generally convincing fashion, express the hopes, aspirations, and, oftentimes, anger and bitterness of layers of African-Americans in a way that resonates with broad audiences.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom was the second work in Wilson's 10-play "Pittsburgh cycle" (and the only one not actually set in the Pennsylvania city), dramatizing the experiences of African-American characters in each decade of the 20th century. The original production, directed by Lloyd Richards (known for directing the first production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*) was a major hit, the first of Wilson's works to achieve significant success. It premiered on Broadway in 1984

and received a Tony Award nomination for best play the following year.

Under the direction of George C. Wolfe (artistic director of New York's Public Theater from 1993 to 2004), the new film is a generally faithful adaptation of Wilson's work. The cast is excellent, with Davis and Boseman as particular standouts. The dialogue—realistic, yet with a kinetic, almost musical quality to it—comes through crisply thanks to the abilities of the capable performers. While some of the longer speeches seem better suited to live theater, the action still holds one's interest throughout.

Without didacticism, Wilson's story expresses something of the frustration and rage of African-Americans during the period. As in many of Wilson's plays, the central dramatic and philosophical conflict is between those who wish to accommodate themselves to the limitations imposed on them by the "white world" and those who, like Levee, rage against those limitations and struggle, sometimes self-destructively, to break free from them.

One senses that Wilson shared Levee's anger at the conditions he faced. The latter is given many of the play's best lines, such as when, in response to a character chastising him for being "dissatisfied" with his lot in life, he responds, in the dialect the playwright chose, "Is you gonna be satisfied with a bone somebody done throwed you when you done seen him eating a whole hog?"

For her part, while Ma postures as "the boss" in the studio, she is in fact acutely aware of the limitations of her position: "As soon as they get my voice down in one of them recording machines then it's just like I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on ... You colored and you can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise you just a dog in the alley."

Of particular note are the film's musical scenes, which include fiery renditions of blues classics "Hear Me Talking to You," "Deep Moaning Blues" and, of course, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" itself. Wilson, a longtime lover of blues music, infused the play with deep feeling for the genre, which shines through in this adaptation.

The play is a striking evocation of African-American life in the 1920s, with an angry indictment of racism and its consequences, both for those blacks who seemingly resign themselves to it and those who oppose it. There is genuine power and legitimacy in the scathing attack on the methods by which the establishment in America subjected the most oppressed sections of the population to

relentless hardships and humiliations.

There are also real limitations to the play and in Wilson's work as a whole, which should not be ignored. He was the product of a particular period, in which the influence of socialism and Marxism had substantially diminished. As the WSWS noted in our review of *Fences* in 2017, the playwright "came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and looked for political direction to such figures as Marcus Garvey, the leading black nationalist of the 1920s, and the Nation of Islam, with the young Malcolm X, before his break with the Black Muslims, as its most prominent spokesman."

Wilson's dramas cover considerable ground, they also leave out a great deal. The exclusivism, the notion that black life or the life of any segment of the population can be abstracted from the social-historical circumstances *as a whole* is a failing. As fiercely as Wilson treats certain features of social reality, one has the continual sensation that other features of that reality, going on in the next street or the next neighborhood, are *forcibly* being withheld from us. That is not a healthy thing in art—the half- or three-quarters picture. The approach opens the door at least to self-pity and ethnic self-promotion.

The nationalist perspective reflected the influence of the Black Power and Black Arts movements, with which he associated in his youth. As the WSWS wrote in 2017, in Wilson's work "assimilation is similar to conciliation to the status quo. The opposite poles of nationalism and assimilation leave out any consideration of the actual unity of the working class across racial lines."

In 1997, for example, during a debate with theater critic, playwright and producer Robert Brustein, Wilson argued for a separate "black theater" in America. Spelling out his perspective, "Let's make a rule," he notoriously proposed, "Blacks don't direct Italian films. Italians don't direct Jewish films. Jews don't direct black American films."

Nonetheless, in so far as Wilson took on oppression directly and persuasively in a piece such as *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, vividly picturing elements of life in the 1920s, he contributed to a coming to terms with the true face of American capitalist reality. From that point of view alone, the current film is worth viewing.



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