

## "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," a revealing play

*Storefront portrayal of racism and degradation in white-controlled world is engrossing and entertaining.*

BY RODGER LARSON

**M**a Rainey's Black Bottom" is not a musical, though there is music in it; it is not about Ma Rainey, though she is a character in it. The focus of the play is not on the famous Blues singer but rather on the four members of her back-up band. All are Black men and each has a perspective on what it means to be oppressed. Storefront Theater's production is a powerful and engaging look at the oppression and its consequences.

The setting of the play is a recording session in Chicago in 1927. Much of the action takes place in a basement rehearsal room where the band waits for Ma Rainey to arrive and then waits again while Rainey and her white manager, Irvin, and the white owner of the studio, Sturdyvant, work out their conflicts. It is in the basement, behind the scenes, that these men can be themselves. They bicker and they argue, but they wind up telling their stories to each other. Each one has developed mechanisms for surviving in a white-controlled world; each has learned to cope with the degradation and hopelessness of lives as servants and second-class citizens who have been exploited, abused and worse.

Three of the band members have been with Ma Rainey for a long time. They are older and they know the score. If they're not resigned to their status they're at least realistic about it. The fourth musician, Levee, is younger and impatient. He's tired of playing "jug band music." He wants to play something more real, more alive. We all know that he is talking about jazz, but jazz has not yet come of age. Levee is also ambitious. He wants to have his own band and to write his own songs. Mr. Sturdyvant has promised to give him a chance. The others know how to take Sturdyvant's promises, but Levee takes them seriously.

When Ma Rainey finally arrives at the recording studio the tensions that have been developing among the band members are temporarily dispelled. The singer is all gold and glitter. She is a star, and that gives her clout. Irvin and Sturdyvant are no match for her: What Madame Rainey wants, Madame Rainey gets. Levee is very impressed with Rainey. He wants

what she's got (even including her girl friend). The others are more open-eyed about her. Once they are back downstairs in the rehearsal room they point out to Levee that her power is conditional and limited. Even the great Ma Rainey can't get a cab and can't stay in a downtown hotel. Levee isn't moved. He wants his own band and to play his own music, and he's willing to bend and scrape before the white man to get it. The others respond with scorn.

The play is a powerful and successful portrayal of the destructive impact of racism, but it is not without its problems. At least part of the message seems to be unclear, because of a paradox in the character of Levee. He sees a new kind of music on the horizon — a more direct and more powerful expression of the Black experience than the simple countrified classic Blues Ma Rainey sings. In this respect he seems to look ahead to an era when Black music will have come into its own. On the other hand, of all the Black people in the play, Levee is the most burdened victim of racism and, in the long run, the most completely destroyed by it. The music he envisioned was born and came to flourish, so what are we to make of his destruction? Is the author trying to tell us that for every "man with a horn" who became a great jazz player there were dozens who never made it? That doesn't seem to have been enough of a focus of the play to explain the ending.

An unanswered question is not the worst thing a play can leave its audience with and "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" leaves us with much more. The play is well acted and well paced. The play remains a drama despite the two musical numbers which enliven the action without redirecting our attention to musical entertainment. Sheila Dale is a glamorous and strong-willed Ma Rainey. Nyewusi Askari plays the double bass, sings, and portrays the mostly comic character, Slow Drag, all with great style. Rick Jones takes the most demanding part as Levee and makes of him a credible, though not entirely sympathetic, character. All in all, Storefront Theatre's production is engrossing and entertaining, with enough meaning and substance to make it a very worthwhile evening at the theatre. •

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