

August Wilson: A Modern Blues Shakespeare

By Brian Stimson
Of The Skanner News

Ma Rainey, in real life, was a ground breaker. She was part of the first generation of female Black recording artists. Her legend was so great that in 1982, playwright August Wilson further immortalized the blues singer in “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.”

Still riding the critical praise of last year’s “Radio Golf,” The Portland Playhouse will begin its run of “Ma Rainey” this weekend to sold-out audiences. The play follows the turmoil between the legendary entertainer, her bandmates, and a record producer, dur-

For Jones, who chose to direct the play for the Playhouse, Wilson’s work on “Ma Rainey” is a huge metaphor about power, born out of old-fashioned American oppression.

Indeed, during a recent rehearsal at the Playhouse, that power dynamic was well at work. Ma Rainey, ready to record, makes a demand that, if not met, will mean further delays to the recording session.

She wants a Coca-Cola. Mel Sturdyvant, the studio’s owner, will have none of it.

But despite Ma’s dwindling star power, everyone knows she’s still a force in the music industry, and is a money maker for Mel. While the White studio owner refuses to help, she gets Slow Drag, the band’s bassist, to go for her.

Backstage, all the tension and aggression of the play drifts away. The actors are laughing and joking, chiding each other like a bunch of college dorm mates.

With only about a 4-week time schedule to put the play together, Jones says the production is an immersion into the world of Wilson.

Julianne Johnson, who plays the title role, says getting the language right – a hurdle for almost every August Wilson production – is one of the chief challenges of the play.

“The language for me, it’s almost like doing Shakespeare. Shakespeare to jazz,” she says with a laugh. “We’re all just too dang proper these days. You have to be able

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ing a single recording session toward the end of Rainey’s career.

Director Kevin Jones says the blues always played an integral part in the life of Wilson and his writings. And The Blues provides the perfect backdrop for a play about human beings acting out on other human beings.

“I’m not sure if he chose it or it chose him,” says Jones, of why Wilson picked the setting he did to tell the story of Black-on-Black violence and racial subjugation in early 20th century America.



to go back to not conjugating everything and just giving it a chance to sing. We just keep searching until we find it. And when we find it, the piece just moves seamlessly. And when we lose it, it just comes screeching to a halt.”

Johnson says Ma is a character that reminds her very much of her mother.

“She is one of the first group of professional women who really had to face a man’s world and keep their dignity and their self-respect through all the things that were happening that were adverse to that,” she said.

At first glance, Ma Rainey doesn’t evoke much sympathy.

“She had to live at one place which was aggressive, direct, uncompromising,” Johnson said. “She’s alone and she knows she’s alone.”

All qualities that are not natural to the actor portraying the singer.

“I have to find that place to make it ring true,” she said.

Johnson says there are glimpses in the play of Ma Rainey that show her softer side

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