

Ma Rainey exposes racism in recording industry

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom
Citadel Shoctor Theatre
through April 16

review by Kevin Law

There is a cold, early March wind blowing in 1927 Chicago as the Paramount recording studio awaits the arrival of Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey, one of the last of the great Negro minstrel artists. Gertrude Rainey's contemporary, Bessie Smith, became the universal symbol of the classic blues, but Ma reigned supreme in her day and the current Shoctor production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes us to just such a day, where she will once again record her songs for a pittance.

While the central figure is Ma Rainey, the play really revolves around her band of black musicians in the basement locker room of a two tiered set. The set itself becomes a metaphor of social stratification. The white studio manager remains up high in the recording booth while a large portion of the Negro drama is played out at the bottom, in the basement. The folkways and personalities of these early jazz/blues musicians, and their thoughts and feelings about their place in society, are revealed in the lower bowels of the studio.

There is great exuberance in the interaction between the band members within the oppressive confines of the locker room, and a visual and aural humor exists in the sight and sound of the subjective black mannerisms and dialect.

All of the characters are fully defined, and the actors playing each role perform well in rendering the very separate and

different characters that make up Ma's band. Particularly good is Lawrence Cook as Toledo, the insatiable philosopher who repeatedly produces allegorical analysis of the black experience. His book learning constantly clashes with Levee, the coronet player, around whom a central conflict revolves concerning his stylistic changes to one of Ma's songs. William Taylor's powerful performance as Levee is really the highlight of the musician ensemble as he brings hyperbolic life to the bombastic, impetuous character who is chomping at the bit of the fragile dream of recording his own music. Taylor makes Levee's every exaggerated move seem deliberate, conveying an image of a man with an unbounded emotional spirit.

Surprisingly good, too, is former Edmonton Eskimo James Zachery in a small turn as Ma Rainey's stuttering, dull-witted nephew Sylvester. He brings an eager-to-please naivete to the role, and his humorous, stuttering attempts at announcing Ma's band for the album was an audience pleaser. Larry Yachimec as Ma's white manager also succeeds at making a smaller role his own. He perfectly accentuates the harried studio atmosphere, playing a frustrated middleman with his hands full who is constantly trying to keep things running smoothly.

Ma Rainey's character, as played by Sandra Reeves-Phillips, is true to the biographical description of a lady who knew she was a blues queen and acted the part with sternness. Phillips absorbs the role with apparent ease, as if she herself is the somewhat arrogant, definitely volcanic mother of the blues whose pride allows her to speak her mind. Phillips has a strong stage presence, partly due to her strength



Kevin Law

The cast of *Ma Rainey's Bottom*, on stage. Though somewhat flawed, the play makes some powerful statements.

of voice, something that becomes even more noteworthy when she sings the play's only two songs.

Unfortunately, however, suffused amongst the many good performances are some production and script problems that sometimes tarnish the play's silver shine. The interactive dialogue between Ma's musicians in the locker room scene is often garbled when spoken too quickly in the black urban dialect. A slowing down by director of Claude Purdy of the too rapid speech, especially in the first act, would make this necessary dialect, so full of emotion and slang phrases, more easily understandable.

As well, the play's three hour length is long, and playwright August Wilson's apparent need for continually pounding home the message of black exploitation by whites is a contributing factor. There are several soliloquies in the play; some are extremely effective, others are not. Most of the monologues about experience and emotional anguish take place in the locker room, and the ones given to Levee about seeing his mother raped and his subsequent disbelief in God contain real emotional impact. But nearly everyone gets to have their say about how terribly exploited they are and such lengthy discussion becomes redundant, expanding the running time beyond the essential.

Such overwrought wordiness by the Negro musicians about their low status and mistreatment by whites lacks a certain depth that could be enhanced through more dramatic interaction with the dominant whites in the play. These Negro artists' psychological and racial abuse does not seem fully explored within the

context of the prejudicial process of the white recording industry. Only in the last few minutes of the play, for example, does the financial abuse of the band become visually apparent.

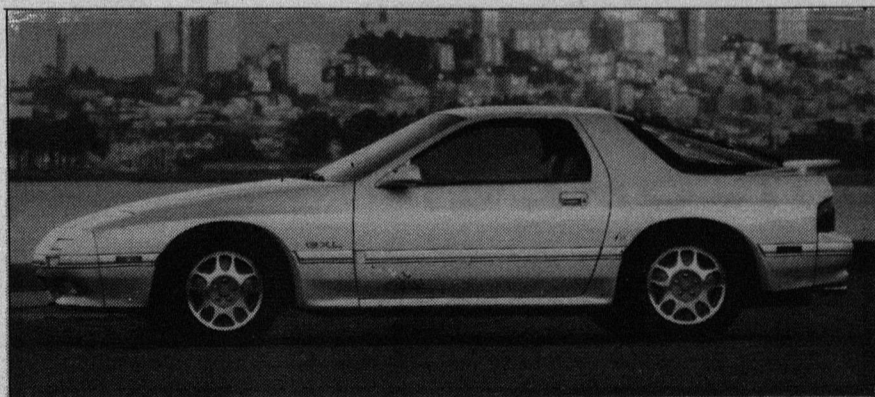
Such long range failures of exploration of theme also apply to the scenes of Ma's belligerent uncooperativeness. She simply wants to maintain her musical integrity, but the strength of her character outweighs the weak and minimal role of the studio manager, who simply blusters at her, never really making any threats of using his considerable power. The result is a lack of balance to Ma's demanding attitude so that her powerful character sometimes seems trite in her stubbornness.

A scrutinized view however, does not a complete picture make. A step back reveals much to admire in a play that is earthy and often potent, if not perfectly cut. Most performances are good, some are excellent, and many of the scenes are truly compelling. Levee's angst ridden rant at God is electric, as is the final tragedy at play's end. Also scintillating is a heated love-making scene between Levee and Ma's companion Dussie Mae. Their passion in the basement humorously coincides with Ma Rainey drinking a whole bottle of coke in one thirsty gulp. It's the pause that refreshes.

All the worthy elements of the play, including another fine Shoctor set by Stencil Campbell, make it hard not to like this tragicomedy, even if it doesn't fully live up to its promise as an elucidation of racial inequality. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is the final Shoctor production of the season, and ultimately it is a play worth seeing for a long night out.

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WEEK ENDING MARCH 22, 1989

THIS LAST WEEKS
WEEK WEEK ON

| | | | | |
|----|----|---|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1 | 14 | 2 | Robyn Hitchcock & the Egyptians | Queen Elvis |
| 2 | 4 | 3 | Proclaimers | Sunshine on Leith |
| 3 | 2 | 4 | Elvis Costello | Spike |
| 4 | - | 1 | XTC | Oranges & Lemons |
| 5 | 8 | 4 | Fairground Attraction | The First of a Million Kisses |
| 6 | 16 | 4 | Dizrythmia | Self-titled |
| 7 | 11 | 2 | They Might Be Giants | Lincoln |
| 8 | 12 | 2 | Ian Tyson | I Outgrew the Wagon |
| 9 | 6 | 6 | The Romaniacs | World on Fire |
| 10 | 15 | 3 | Tone Loc | Loc'd After Dark |
| 11 | - | 6 | Lyle Lovett & His Large Band | Pontiac |
| 12 | 7 | 7 | Replacements | Don't Tell a Soul |
| 13 | - | 1 | Firehose | From Ohio |
| 14 | - | 2 | Bel Canto | Whiteout Conditions |
| 15 | 5 | 3 | Fine Young Cannibals | The Raw & the Cooked |
| 16 | - | 1 | Guadalcanal Diary | Flip Flop |
| 17 | 9 | 7 | Yello | Flag |
| 18 | 10 | 3 | Gary Fjellgard | Heart of a Dream |
| 19 | - | 1 | Bob Dylan & the Grateful Dead | Dylan and the Dead |
| 20 | - | 1 | Rapeman | Two Nuns & a Packmule |

EPs

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|-------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | 3 | 2 | Chocolate Affaire | Botha |
| 2 | 1 | 4 | Pogues | Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah |
| 3 | 9 | 2 | Kon Kan | I Beg Your Pardon |
| 4 | 6 | 2 | Theloniou Monster | Sammy Hagar Weekend |
| 5 | - | 1 | Plasterscene | Replicas |