

HUNTINGTON
THEATRE
COMPANY PRESENTS

POWERFUL AND MOVING DRAMA

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM

BY
AUGUST
WILSON

DIRECTED BY
LIESL
TOMMY

MAR. 9 - APR. 8
AVENUE OF THE ARTS
BU THEATRE



CURRICULUM GUIDE

huntingtontheatre.org/education

This Curriculum Guide prepared by Gerry Dunn for the Education Department at the Huntington Theatre Company.

OBJECTIVES

Students will:

1. Learn proper audience etiquette before seeing the performance
2. Explore the play's artistic and historical context
3. Identify central themes in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, including
 - a. Exploitation, Consumerism, & Social Mobility
 - b. The Problematic Role of Religion in Black American Culture
 - c. Race, The Blues, & Education
4. Participate in hands-on activities that enhance understanding of the play and of the production
5. Critique the Huntington Theatre Company's production of the play

AUDIENCE ETIQUETTE

Because many students have not had the opportunity to view live theatre, we are including an audience etiquette section with each curriculum guide. Teachers, please spend time on this subject; it will enhance your students' experience at the Huntington.

- How does one respond to a live performance of a play, as opposed to a film at a movie theater? What is the best way to view a live performance? For what should you look and listen?
- What is the audience's role during a live performance? How do you think audience behavior can affect an actor's performance?
- What do you know about the theatrical rehearsal process? Have you ever participated in one as an actor, singer, director, or technician?
- How do costumes, set, lights, sound, and props enhance a theatre's production?

PLAYWRIGHT

When August Wilson succumbed to liver cancer at the age of sixty in 2005, he died a proud, successful man — a self-made man who left a legacy that will not soon be forgotten. He set himself a challenge equivalent to climbing a great mountain: he would, he declared, write ten plays, each one set in a different decade of the 20th century, chronicling the history of the African-American experience in this country. When he died, he had reached the summit of that mountain.

Born Frederick August Kittel on April 27, 1945, he was the son of Daisy Wilson, whose mother had walked to Pittsburgh from North Carolina after Emancipation. His father was Frederick Kittel, a German baker who wasn't present in the family's cold-water flat on Bedford Avenue in Pittsburgh's Hill District. Wilson grew up in an African-American cultural environment; he had very little contact with his father over the course of his life, and shed his father's name at twenty.

Wilson's mother taught him to read at age four, and he quickly became a voracious reader. He was a regular at the Hill District branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, and said in a speech at the 100th anniversary of that library, "Labor historians do not speak well of Andrew Carnegie, but he will forever be for me that man who made it possible for me to be standing here today. I wore out my library card and cried when I lost it."

The Carnegie Library did more than supplement his education — it provided it. When he was a fifteen-year-old student at Gladstone High School, his teacher threw out a twenty-page report he had written on Napoleon, believing falsely that he had not done the work himself. Disgusted, he left school and never returned. Rather than admit to his mother what had happened, Wilson began spending his days at the main branch of the Carnegie Library in Oakland where he created his own educational curriculum and grappled with the great writers at his own pace. He remains the only person ever to be awarded a high school diploma by the Carnegie Library.

To come of age in the Hill District in the 1960s was to grow up in a neighborhood on the decline, but still clinging to life. Wilson's substitute fathers were the men hanging out in grocery stores and diners and chatting on street corners, telling stories and singing songs. Wilson basked in this verbal culture, and it became a part of him. On April 1,

AUGUST WILSON AT THE HUNTINGTON		
PLAY	SETTING	SEASON
<i>Gem of the Ocean</i>	1900s	2004-2005
<i>Joe Turner's Come and Gone</i>	1910s	1986-1987
<i>Ma Rainey's Black Bottom</i>	1920s	2011-2012
<i>The Piano Lesson</i>	1930s	1987-1988
<i>Seven Guitars</i>	1940s	1995-1996
<i>Fences</i>	1950s	2009-2010
<i>Two Trains Running</i>	1960s	1990-1991
<i>Jitney</i>	1970s	1998-1999
<i>King Hedley II</i>	1980s	1999-2000
<i>Radio Golf</i>	1990s	2006-2007

1965, using twenty dollars his sister had given him to write a term paper for her, August Wilson bought his first typewriter and declared himself a poet. He connected with other young black writers, and in 1968, he co-founded the Black Horizon Theater in Pittsburgh with Rob Penny. He began writing plays around this time, but did not seriously devote himself to drama until 1978 when, at the suggestion of director Claude Purdy, he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota and wrote the original, one-act version of *Jitney*. The play was a huge success, both in the Twin Cities and in Pittsburgh at the fledgling Allegheny Repertory Theatre. Wilson's career as a playwright had begun in earnest.



August Wilson.
Photo: Michael Romanos

In 1983, Wilson submitted his first full-length play, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, to the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center's National Playwrights Conference, and was accepted. At the O'Neill, the play was championed by Lloyd Richards, the artistic director of the Yale Repertory Theatre and of the O'Neill Playwrights Conference. Richards immediately snapped up the rights, directing it himself at Yale Rep the next year in a smash production featuring Theresa Merritt as Ma Rainey and a young Charles S. Dutton in his breakout role as Levee. The play transferred to Broadway in 1984, and Wilson began to attract national attention. Wilson and Richards followed up with *Fences*, starring James Earl Jones and Mary Alice in 1987, winning Wilson his first Pulitzer Prize for Drama and the Tony Award for Best Play.

Flush with these successes, Wilson moved to Seattle in 1990 and continued to write the plays of his cycle. Along with his longtime producer Ben Mordecai (who had been the managing director of Yale Rep) and his directors — Richards, then Marion McClinton, and finally Kenny Leon — Wilson created a method of production and rewriting that used American regional theatres as a testing ground for his plays. At theatres like the Huntington Theatre Company, Seattle Repertory Theatre, Centerstage in Baltimore, Chicago's Goodman Theatre, Pittsburgh Public Theater, and many others, Wilson would produce the premieres of his plays, but those premieres served only as first drafts. He and his team would move from theatre to theatre, from city to city, almost as if they were re-creating their own version of the 19th century vaudeville circuit. The plays would be honed and refined all over the country before finally arriving on Broadway. With his prodigious talent August Wilson created something of a cottage industry and many African-American actors, directors, and designers across the country give him credit for keeping them working, and working on material close to their own experiences.

Success followed success and, one by one, Wilson told the stories of each decade of the 20th century. He won his second Pulitzer Prize for *The Piano Lesson* in 1990 and wrote the screenplay for a TV movie of the play, which starred Alfre Woodard. For many years he worked to transform *Fences* into a feature film, but Hollywood could not fulfill his one demand: that the film be directed by an African-American director. He was frustrated by this failure and, in 1996, took out his frustration during the keynote address at the Theatre Communications Group Conference in a speech entitled "The Ground On Which I Stand." This speech excoriated the American theatre community for segregating the work of African-American artists and "ghettoizing" their plays — creating the "black play" slot. He called on African-American theatre artists to create their own parallel institutions for the production of their work. The speech was

condemned by critic Robert Brustein in *The New Republic*, who accused Wilson of cultural separatism and championed the idea of color-blind and race-neutral casting in theatre. In 1997, Wilson and Brustein met at a public debate on the issue at New York's Town Hall. While both scored points, neither walked away a decisive victor, but the debate itself reignited the idea that the theatre could be a place where the great questions of society could be addressed passionately and productively.

Meanwhile, Wilson's work continued, and the cycle neared completion. When *Radio Golf* opened at the Yale Rep in May 2005, it marked the completion of a great life's work, but Wilson already knew he was not long for this world. After the Yale production and a subsequent production in Los Angeles, Wilson secluded himself in Seattle to complete his revisions on the play. After a short hospitalization, he died on October 2, 2005, standing atop a theatrical mountain that he had both conceived and scaled.

-Kyle W. Brenton

CONTEXT OF *MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM*

The play takes place in Chicago during the **Roaring Twenties**, the period after World War I when the North American economy flourished, and the United States enjoyed a return to “normalcy” after the devastating events of the previous decade. This period was also characterized by generational, racial, and sexual upheaval, which were major influences in several movements of the 1920s, including **Women’s Suffrage**, the rise of **Jazz** and dance clubs, the exile of the “**Lost**” **Generation**, and **Prohibition**. These conflicts were also the inspiration for an artistic movement that began in the 1920s called **Modernism** – a movement to which August Wilson himself was a late-coming member.

In Wilson’s preface to the play, he writes that: “Chicago in 1927 is a rough city, a bruising city, a city of millionaires and of derelicts, gangsters and roughhouse dandies, whores and Irish grandmothers who move through its streets fingering long black rosaries. Somewhere a man is wrestling with the taste of a woman in his cheek. Somewhere a dog is barking. Somewhere the moon has fallen through a window and broken into thirty pieces of silver.”

- Research literary Modernism. What other writers that you’ve read belong to the Modernist movement? What characteristics do they and August Wilson share?
- Wilson never explicitly mentions women’s suffrage or prohibition in his play. How does he communicate the presence of these major events to his audience? How do they relate to the play’s broader themes?
- Wilson’s prose description of Chicago in the 1920s is very poetic. What rhetorical or stylistic techniques does he use to achieve this effect?
- Wilson’s writes that “Somewhere the moon has fallen through a window and broken into thirty pieces of silver.” This is an allusion to the passage in the New Testament of the Bible where Judas betrays Jesus to the authorities in exchange for thirty silver coins. What do you think Wilson is trying to achieve with this allusion? Given the play’s themes, what is the significance of a religious reference in the preface?
- Research Question: August Wilson said that his work was most influenced by four B’s – that is, four people or things which began with the letter B. Research Wilson’s life, and what these four B’s were. Can you see their influence in *Ma Rainey*?

CHARACTERS IN *MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM*

All quotations taken directly from the text of the play. Where necessary, we have included additional comments and discussion of the character after Wilson's own description.

Sturdyvant:

"Preoccupied with money, he is insensitive to black performers and prefers to deal with them at arm's length." Sturdyvant is probably the play's least sympathetic character; nevertheless, because he is in a position of power, every character except for Ma is deferential to him.

Irvin:

"A tall, fleshy man who prides himself on his knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them." Irvin is Ma's manager, and goes to great pains to appease both Ma and Sturdyvant simultaneously.

Cutler:

"Cutler is in his mid-fifties, as are most of the others. He plays guitar and trombone and is the leader of the group, possibly because he is the most sensible. His playing is solid and almost totally unembellished. His understanding of his music is limited to the chord he is playing at the time he is playing it. He has all the qualities of a loner except the introspection."

Toledo:

"The piano player. In control of his instrument, he understands and recognizes that its limitations are an extension of himself. He is the only one in the group who can read. He is self-taught but misunderstands and misapplies his knowledge, though he is quick to penetrate to the core of a situation and his insights are thought-provoking."

Slow Drag

"Perhaps the most bored by life. He resembles Cutler, but lacks Cutler's energy. He is deceptively intelligent, though, as his name implies, he appears to be slow. He is a rather large man with a wicked smile. Innate African rhythms underlie everything he plays, and he plays with an ease that is at times startling."

Levee:

"In his early thirties, Levee is younger than the other men. His flamboyance is sometimes subtle and sneaks up on you. His temper is rakish and bright. He lacks fuel for himself and is somewhat of a buffoon. But it is an intelligent buffoonery, clearly calculated to shift control of the situation to where he can grasp it. He plays trumpet. His voice is strident and totally dependent on his manipulation of breath. He plays wrong notes frequently. He often gets his skill and talent confused with each other." Levee is extremely ambitious, both professionally and sexually – he plans to become a successful musician by signing on with Sturdyvant's label, and believes that that success will charm Dussie Mae. He has learned from his father to appease white people to their faces, while secretly hating them.

Dussie Mae:

“A young, dark-skinned woman whose greatest asset is the sensual energy which seems to flow from her.” Dussie Mae is the play’s quietest character. Ma attempts to prevent her from flaunting her sexuality, but Dussie Mae nonetheless succeeds in teasing Levee. It is unclear whether she is sincerely attracted to Levee, or if she is only attaching herself to him for social gain.

Madame Rainey (Ma):

“Her manner is simple and direct, and she carries herself in a royal fashion.” The play’s nominal hero, Ma Rainey is the only character who stands up to Sturdyvant. In contrast with Dussie Mae, Ma routinely uses her influence to win out over the men in the play – in fact, she goes out of her way to be a “diva” just to draw attention to her authority. She is only able to do this because of her musical talent: she acknowledges to Cutler in the second act “as soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it’s just like if I’d be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on.”

THEMES

RACE, EXPLOITATION, & THE AMERICAN DREAM

Economic Exploitation is the unfair or abusive treatment of workers by their employer. **Social Mobility** is the process by which a person or group improves in education, social class, and above all income, over a period of time. The concept of social mobility is particularly important to **The American Dream**, the idealistic belief that in the United States any person, regardless of social class, ethnicity, or income, can build



a happy family and earn a good income, provided he or she works hard enough. Owning a house with a white picket fence is often used as a symbol of the American Dream: a house stands for both prosperity and family, while a white fence stands for both security and morality. Wilson alludes to this in the first act of *Ma Rainey*, when Slow Drag describes Eliza Cotter's wealth: "Bought him a big fine house... Well, it wasn't all that big, but it did have one of them white picket fences

around it. Used to hire a man once a week just to paint that fence."

In all ten plays of the 20th Century Cycle, August Wilson explores different aspects of the American Dream as it relates to Black Americans. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, every major black character aspires, or at some point has aspired, to achieving the American Dream through social mobility. However, their hopes are often obstructed by the play's white characters. Sturdyvant and Irvin know that Ma Rainey's albums sell well, yet they still exploit her for her voice. Levee writes songs for Sturdyvant, and Sturdyvant knows that the songs are good. Yet at the end of the play, when Levee asks him about purchasing the songs, Sturdyvant responds that he "just doesn't think people will buy them," so that he can buy the songs from Levee at a cheaper price, and then have them recorded with white artists.

Strangely, in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson uses shoes and feet as symbols of social mobility and exploitation. The most obvious use of this motif is Levee's new shoes. After he puts on his new, eleven-dollar shoes, he exclaims "Yeah! Now I'm ready! I can play some good music now!" Later, when talking about Toledo's shoes, he says "He ain't nothing but a sharecropper." (In the U.S., a sharecropper was usually a freed slave who continued to work on a plantation for low wages after the Civil War; Levee uses "sharecropper" to suggest a low-class or poor person.) Toledo stepping on his shoe at the end of the play is also, ostensibly, the reason for stabbing him.

- A. Find another section within the play where a character discusses the American Dream, social mobility, or exploitation as it relates to race. What does this comment suggest about its speaker? About the play? About America?

- B. Shoes and feet are significant for other characters in the play as well. When Dussie Mae complains to Ma that her shoes hurt her feet, Ma insists that she get new ones: “Don’t you be messing around with no shoes that pinch your feet. Ma know something about bad feet.” At the beginning of Act Two, it is also significant that Ma “walks about shoeless,” and softly sings to herself a song about aching feet.
 - Why do you think Wilson chose shoes and aching feet as the central motif of *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*?
 - For Levee, new shoes symbolize social mobility. What do shoelessness and aching feet symbolize for Ma Rainey? For Dussie Mae?
 - There are dozens of deliberate allusions to shoes and feet in the play. Find another character’s comment about shoes or feet. How does the motif function for this character?

- C. Research the life of President Obama. Does his life embody the American Dream? Why or why not? Does his personal history remind you of anyone you know personally? President Obama worked in Chicago in the 1980s. How might his life have unfolded if he had lived in Chicago in the 1920s, like the characters in Wilson’s play? Would he have been able to overcome exploitation and racism where Levee and Toledo did not?

- D. The American Dream has been increasingly criticized in the 20th and 21st centuries as a philosophy that makes no room for charity. Although a small percentage of people born into poverty are lucky enough to succeed economically, critics argue, the overwhelming majority have too few resources available to them, or are too exploited by the an economy that favors the wealthy to achieve any social mobility.

- E. Research two recent political movements: the Tea Party and Occupy Wall Street. What do these groups have to say about the American Dream? Does either criticize it, or does each attempt to fit it into its own philosophy? Do the arguments of either movement resonate with anything you read in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*? Does either perspective appeal to you? Why or why not?

- F. Go to news.google.com and search for a few of these terms: “handouts,” “poverty,” “wealth gap,” “by your bootstraps,” “workforce,” “the one percent,” and “educational disadvantage.” Find a few articles that discuss the same themes that Wilson addresses in *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*. How have issues changed since the 1920s? How have they remained the same? Cite specific examples from the play and from the articles.

- G. After having read or viewed *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, consider what August Wilson thinks of the American Dream? Is it realistic? Idealistic? Inclusive? Racist? Does he only present one vision of the American Dream, or does he provide several perspectives? Cite specific examples from the text in your answer.

“WHITE MAN’S GOD”

Religion is another important theme in the play. The band members, especially Levee and Cutler, all have differing opinions on religion and its role in the life of 20th-century Black Americans. Wilson first introduces the theme in the middle of Act One, when Slow Drag says that he knows a man, Eliza Cotter, who “sold his soul to the devil,” and went around carrying “one of them carpetbags.” This is an allusion to **carpetbaggers**, a pejorative term that Southerners used to describe Northerners who came to the South after the Civil War to take advantage of its fragile economy. Levee half-jokingly says that he would like to meet this man, so that he too can sell his soul to the Devil.

The theme advances further in Act Two, when Cutler tells the story of Reverend Gates. According to Cutler’s story, Reverend Gates was harassed by a gang of Southern white men, despite being a Christian minister. When Levee hears the story, he responds “If he’s a man of God, then where the hell was God when all of this was going on? Why wasn’t God looking out for him? Why didn’t God strike down them crackers with some of this lightning you talk about to me? ...’Cause he a white man’s God. That’s why!” (Levee’s complete monologue is in the *Important Quotes* section.) Cutler is so offended by Levee’s blasphemy that he punches him in the mouth. Levee pulls a knife, and calls on “Cutler’s God” to stop him from killing Cutler. Caught up in his passion, he forgets Cutler and begins trying to stab God, and to remember the scene from his childhood when a gang of white men raped his mother. Because God didn’t answer his mother’s pleas, and has not, so far as he can tell, ever interceded in his favor, he believes that God only answers white people’s prayers.

- A. Wilson sets Cutler up as Levee’s **antithesis**, or extreme opposite on a particular issue. While Levee is vehemently anti-religion, Cutler is very devout, and becomes violently angry when Levee begins to curse God. What does Wilson think of Cutler? What do you think of him? Does his faith make him a better person than Levee, or do his opinions set him too far in the opposite extreme? Remember that Cutler struck Levee before Levee drew his knife.
- B. Within the play, there are two parallel stories that discuss the harassment and abuse of Black Americans by Southern whites: the rape of Levee’s mother, and the attack on Reverend Gates. Both of these stories have religious aspects: Levee’s mother called out to God to save her, and Reverend Gates was a minister. It is partially Levee’s pent-up anger from these incidents that causes him to stab Toledo at the end of the play. What is Wilson, who is writing in the 1980s, saying about black-on-black violence?

RACE, THE BLUES, & EDUCATION

In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, all of the black characters face the dilemma of how to advance in society despite being discriminated against by that society. The play discusses the two particular ways to achieve this: The blues – that is, success in the music industry – and education.

Wilson felt strongly about that musical style, the blues, and its relationship with the Black American experience. He once said, “I see the blues as The Book, if blacks have one book that is going to inform their sensibilities. The music is a cultural response to our experience and it gives us an awareness of being African.” Ma Rainey’s view of the blues is similar to Wilson’s: she believes that they contain an essential African-ness: “white folks don’t understand the blues. They hear what come out, but they don’t know where it come from.” Levee, on the other hand, isn’t so interested in “an awareness of being African” as he is in romantic-modernist art as a transcendent experience, and the artist a liberator from the hollowness of modern life. He is frustrated by the band’s view of music as nothing but a paycheck:

Levee: Ain’t nothing but old jug-band music. They need one of them jug bands for this.

Slow Drag: Don’t make me no difference. Long as we get paid.

Levee: That ain’t what I’m talking about, nigger. I’m talking about art!

Slow Drag: What’s drawing got to do with it?

Wilson also discusses education as a way for blacks to overcome discrimination. Toledo, the only literate band member, particularly advocates education, and repeatedly calls Levee “ignorant” throughout the play. When Levee starts pontificating about art and music, Toledo responds that “you can’t even spell music, much less play it.” (Levee proceeds to spell music M-U-S-I-K.)

- Later in the play, when Toledo is again lecturing the band on the importance of educating themselves, Levee retorts “Now you gonna be Booker T. Washington.” Research Booker T. Washington’s beliefs about education for blacks in America. What does he have in common with Toledo? With the other characters’ philosophies? How do his writings compare with the play’s themes?
- Wilson and Ma Rainey alike believe that there is something essentially “African” about the blues. Can a kind of music only appeal to one race? Does this idea strike you as empowering, or as racist? Think of modern music: can only southerners understand country music? Is Reggaeton only for Latinos? Does this cultivate pride among minority groups, or does it create an illusion of racial difference, which is ultimately destructive? Try to incorporate themes from the play in your answer. Are there any characters from *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* who agree with your opinion?

ARTS ASSESSMENT

DRAMA

Characterization:

Choose a character from *Ma Rainey* to portray, as if you were preparing for rehearsal. Consider your character's cultural background and how it influences his actions in the play. Then, as your character, answer the following questions:

1. What do I want? What is my overall objective?
2. What stands in the way of what I want? What or who are my obstacles in the way of achieving my objective? Does what I want change throughout the course of the play? How?
3. How, if at all, does my character change during the course of the play? What is my character's journey or plot transformation?
4. Are there any contradictions inherent in my character?

Role Playing:

Improvise an important moment from *Ma Rainey*. Test the effects of changing something about the performance – tone of voice, a character trait, or a vital remark. How does such a change affect the selected moment? How does the pacing or posturing of an actor affect the timing of the piece? Is it possible that a change in the tone of voice can turn a serious moment into a humorous one?

Improvise a scene that is mentioned in the play but is not present, e.g. Levee buying his new shoes, Ma Rainey's car getting hit, Levee's father selling his farm, or the Reverend Gates in Sigsbee.

Choose one character at a particularly defining moment in his life, prior to or subsequent to the events of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Individually create a monologue, or in pairs create a dialogue, which portrays this defining moment in the character's life. How do the character's choices and reaction to this fictional defining moment compare with the events in the play?

DESIGN

Costume:

Imagine that you have been asked to design costumes for the play. For each scene, write down what each character is wearing. Then, draw the costumes, or provide pictures from magazines or the internet as a visual aid for your plan.

Set & Lighting:

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom takes place in Chicago in 1927, which August Wilson describes as "a rough city, a bruising city, a city of millionaires and derelicts, gangsters and roughhouse dandies, whores and Irish grandmothers who move through its streets

fingering long black rosaries.” Within that context, the action of the play occurs in a recording studio, with the action shuttling between the “band room” and the studio.

Imagine that you are the set and lighting designer, and write a detailed description of the play’s set, or make a detailed drawing. How big is the band room? How big is the studio? Is either decorated? What furniture is there, and how is it arranged? Where on the set will the characters be at crucial moments in the scene?

After attending the production, compare your description, the description at the end of the play, and the Huntington’s set. Which is most appropriate for the events of the play?

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

MASTERY ASSESSMENT – MA RAINEY’S BLACK BOTTOM

Act One

1. What do you think Wilson means when he describes Levee as “often [getting] his skill and talent confused with each other”?
2. Levee is proud of a recent purchase. What did he buy?
3. What drug are the band members using before Ma arrives?
4. What is the name of the song that Levee wants to play “differently”?
5. Slow drag tells the story of Eliza Cotter, a man who suddenly gets very rich. According to Slow Drag, how does he acquire his wealth?
6. Why was Ma late?
7. Who is Sylvester?
8. Which version of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” do they end up performing, Ma’s or Levee’s?
9. What does Ma want Sylvester to do for the recording, and why is it a problem?
10. Levee had a role model who taught him how to “handle the white man.” Who was it?

Act Two

1. What drink does Ma demand before she will begin recording?
2. What went wrong with the recording of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”?
3. Why did Toledo’s wife leave him?
4. What happened to Reverend Gates in Sigsbee?
5. What causes Levee to nearly stab Cutler?
6. How does Irvin initially suggest that Sylvester be paid? Why does he change his mind?
7. Why doesn’t the band want to be paid with a check?
8. What does Sturdyvant tell Levee about buying the songs he wrote?

IMPORTANT QUOTES

Use the following quotations to discuss specific events in Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom in context, or to discuss the universal ideas expressed by the quotations. You might use the quotations as springboards to essays or role-playing, or as the first lines of letters, poems, or short stories. Develop any theme you choose. Also search for pictures, paintings, music, or any work of art to which you might apply a part of one of these quotations as a title.

1. Toledo: See, now... I’ll tell you something. As long as the colored man look to white folks to put the crown on what he say... as long as he looks to white folks for approval... then he ain’t never gonna find out who he is and what he’s about. He’s just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That’s one sure thing.

2. Slow Drag: Well, the colored man’s gonna be all right. He got through slavery, and he’ll get through whatever else the white man put on him. I ain’t worried about that. Good times is what makes life worth living. Now, you take the

white man... The white man don't know how to have a good time. That's why he's troubled all the time. He don't know how to have a good time. He don't know how to laugh at life.

3. Toledo: Everybody come from different places in Africa, right? Come from different tribes and things. Soonawhile they began to make one big stew. You had the carrots, the peas, and potatoes and whatnot over here. And over there, you had the meat, the nuts, the okra, corn... and then you mix it up and let it cook right through to get the flavors flowing together... then you got one thing. You got a stew. [...] See, we's the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now what's the colored man gonna do with himself? That's what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers. Now, who knows that? You find me a nigger that knows that and I'll turn any which-a-way you want me to. I'll bend over for you. You ain't gonna find that. And that's what the problem is. The problem ain't the white man. the white man, know you just a leftover. 'Cause he the one who done the eating and know what he done ate. But we don't now that we been took and made history out of [...]

4. Ma Rainey: All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them. They back there now calling me all kinds of names... calling me everything but a child of God. But they can't do nothing else. They ain't got what they wanted yet. As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it's just like I'd be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain't got no use for me then.

5. Slow Drag: Ain't nothing wrong with hauling wood. I done hauled plenty of wood. My daddy used to haul wood. Ain't nothing wrong with that. That's honest work.

6. Levee: That ain't what I'm talking about. I ain't talking about hauling no wood. I'm talking about being satisfied with a bone somebody done throwed you. That's what's the matter with you all. You satisfied sitting in one place. You got to move on down the road from where you sitting... and all the time you got to keep an eye out for that devil who's looking to buy up souls. And hope you get lucky and find him!

7. Levee: What I care about burning in hell? You talk like a fool ... burning in hell. Why didn't God strike some of them crackers down? Tell me that! That's the question! Don't come telling me this burning-in-hell shit! He a man of God ... why didn't God strike some of those crackers down? I'll tell you why! I'll tell you the truth! It's sitting out there as plain as day! 'Cause he is a white man's God. That's why! God ain't never listened to no nigger's prayers. God takes a nigger's prayers and throw them in the garbage. God don't pay niggers no mind. In fact ... God hate niggers! Hate them with all the fury in his heart. Jesus don't love you, nigger! Jesus hate your black ass! Come talking that shit to me. Talking about burning in hell. God can kiss my ass.

OPEN RESPONSE & WRITING

1. In the *Characters* section of this guide, read Wilson's description of the four band members. Is there a common structure in the way he describes them? Interpreting each member as a metaphor for a different understanding of the black identity in the 1920s, how does Wilson craft that identity into the play's character? (It may be particularly useful to examine how Wilson discusses each character's musical talents.)
2. Read the following exchange from the beginning of Act One, when the band has discovered that the recording studio has been rearranged:

Levee: Damn! They done changed things around. Don't never leave well enough alone.

Toledo: Everything changing all the time. Even the air you breathing change. You got, monoxide, hydrogen... changing all the time. Skin changing... different molecules and everything.

Levee: Nigger, what is you talking about? I'm talking about the room. I ain't talking about no skin and no air. I'm talking about something I can see! Last time the band room was upstairs. This time it's downstairs. Next time it be over there. I'm talking about what I can see. I ain't talking about no molecules or nothing.

What does Wilson accomplish with this exchange? Given the band members' personalities, why is it important that Toledo understands "change" more broadly, whereas Levee is only interested in change that he "can see"? Is it significant that Toledo mentions that skin, too changes? How?

3. In his introduction to the play's characters, Wilson says that Irvin "prides himself on his knowledge of blacks and his ability to deal with them." Late in Act One, Levee says: "I can say 'yessir' to whoever I please... I know how to handle white folks." What do you think that Wilson is achieving by setting up this parallel between Irvin and Levee?
4. Describe Ma's relationship with her niece, Dussie Mae. At points, Ma is very indulgent of Dussie Mae, and promises to take her shopping for new clothes. Yet she also has a peculiar attitude toward Dussie Mae's youth and sensuality, telling her at one point to "go sit your behind down somewhere and quit flaunting yourself around." How do you explain this? Is Ma protective? Jealous? Threatened? Something else? Cite specific portions of the play to justify your answer. What do you make of Dussie Mae in general? What does she want from Ma? From Levee? What's the significance of the band members calling Dussie Mae "Ma's girl," in the possessive?
5. Why does Levee stab Toledo in the final moments of the play? He is obviously upset about more than Toledo scuffing his shoe. Consider Sturdyvant's decision regarding the songs he wrote, Ma kicking him out of the band, his efforts to impress Dussie Mae, the attack on his mother when he was a child, and any other incidents that you think may be relevant. Given that Wilson wrote the play in the 1980s, why do you think he characterizes the final scene the way he does? Is he making a comment about black-on-black violence? Is Levee entirely to blame for

the stabbing, or is society at large responsible for driving him to the attack? Why does he stab Toledo instead of, say, Sturdyvant? Why does he continue to threaten Toledo even after he's stabbed him ("I'm warning you, nigger! Close your eyes!")

6. Wilson's stage directions at the end of the play, after Levee stabs Toledo:

(The sound of a trumpet is heard, Levee's trumpet, a muted trumpet struggling for the highest of possibilities and blowing pain and warning. Blackout.)
END OF PLAY.

How do you interpret this conclusion? Reading the play allegorically, what is the significance of Levee's trumpet, specifically, "blowing pain and warning" just before blackout?

7. Although Ma's name is in the title of the play, she actually has fewer lines than the band members. Is she really the play's protagonist? Why or why not? If not, who, if anyone, is?

CRITIQUE

After attending the production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* at the Huntington Theatre Company, write a two-page review of the production. Try to critique the artistic and technical aspects of the play – the set, lighting, etc. – and the play in general – how well the Huntington brought Wilson's play to life.

Group Project: Divide into two groups: those who felt that the Huntington's production of *Ma Rainey* was a well-considered adaptation of the play, and those who did not. Stage a debate with the opposing side. If you are arguing against the Huntington's production, give specific examples of how it fell short. If you are arguing in favor, give specific examples of how the production improved your understanding of Wilson's work.

LESSON PLANS

Choose activities that are appropriate for your classroom period. All assignments are, of course, only suggestions. Only a teacher knows his or her class well enough to determine the level and depth to which it can study a piece of literature.

TWO DAY LESSON PLAN

This plan introduces students to the context and major themes of the production.

Day One – Introducing the Play

1. Please review *Audience Etiquette* with your class.
2. Read a *Context* of the play.
3. If time allows, discuss other works with similar themes that the students have already studied.

Day Two – The Production

FOUR DAY LESSON PLAN

This plan introduces students to the production and then, after viewing the performance, asks them to think critically about what they have seen. Includes time for class discussion and individual assessment.

Day One – Introducing the Play

1. Same as above; complete before seeing the production.
2. Briefly discuss the *Themes* outlined in this guide.

Day Two – The Production

Day Three – Follow-up Discussion

1. Answer any questions students may have about the production.
2. Discuss one or more of the items from *Themes* more specifically, now that your students have seen the production.
3. Homework: Students should prepare for a test on the material, which will include quotes, and mastery as well as open-ended questions.

Day Four – Test

1. Individual Assessment: Choose five of the *Important Quotes*, and have students identify their speaker and their significance in the play. Choose three prompts from *Open Response and Writing*, and have students respond to one in a well-reasoned, thesis-driven essay.
2. Homework: Have students complete a two page, double-spaced response to one of the *Open Response and Writing* prompts.

SIX DAY LESSON PLAN

This plan completely integrates Ma Rainey's Black Bottom into your curriculum. Within six school days, you can introduce the play, assign reading, and assess your students individually and in groups. Ideally, students will view the play after completing the Mastery Assessment questions.

Day One – Introducing the Play

1. Same as above.
2. Homework: Read Act One and answer the corresponding *Mastery Assessment* questions. Students do not have to write out the answers to the questions, but there may be a quiz.

Day Two – Act One

1. Address any questions that the students may have on the reading or the questions.
2. Discuss Act One, using prompts from *Themes*.
3. Homework: Read Act Two and answer the corresponding *Mastery Assessment* questions. Students do not have to write out the answers to the questions, but there may be a quiz.

Day Three – Act Two

1. Again, please review *Audience Etiquette* with your class.
2. If you doubt that your students are doing the reading, give a quiz, either inventing your own questions or taking them from the *Mastery Assessment*.
3. Address any questions that the students may have on the reading or the questions.
4. Discuss Act Two, using prompts from *Themes*.

Day Four – The Production

Day Five – Group Work

1. Ask if students have any questions about the production.
2. Break students into groups, and have them do one of the group projects from the *Themes* or *Additional Activities* sections, or any of the activities from the *Arts Assessment*.
3. Homework: Students should study for a test the following day, which will include quotes, and mastery as well as open-ended questions.

Day Six – Test

1. Individual Assessment: Have students define several words from *Vocabulary*. Choose five of the *Important Quotes*, and have students identify their speaker and their significance in the play. Choose three prompts from *Open Response and Writing*, and have students respond to one in a well-reasoned, thesis-driven essay.
2. Homework: Have students complete a two page, double-spaced response to one of the *Open Response and Writing* prompts that did not appear on the test.