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National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Ma Rainey's Black Bottom on Broadway

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[[image: photograph of Whoopi Goldberg]]
 [[caption]] "Ma Rainey is the equivalent of a hurricane in 1920's America . . . for her to be that strong and that powerful is a pretty remarkable thing for that time."
 --Goldberg [[/caption]]

Tony-nominated. Next up, due on Broadway in 2003, is Gem of the Ocean, but the finale in his cycle of ten plays is still on the drawing boards. All, save for Rainey, are set in his hometown of Pittsburgh, and all filter the black experience in this country through different decades.

August Wilson's America is still evolving, and already it's "in reruns." Whoopi and "Roc" and Wilson and Rainey all find themselves back on Broadway (this time at the Royale Theatre), where they began that long-ago October. "Everyone said they wanted to do this," says Goldberg of this creative collaboration, "and someone must have been listening because it's happening."

Gertrude (Ma) Rainey, the legendary and real "mother of the blues" (1886-1939), is a role she had an eye on for some time. "I've been fighting this in my head, thinking no one should ever do something that someone else did, and I'm finding all the reasons not to do this, but none of them meant anything 'cause here I am. It helps to have a good, strong self-image if you're going out and doing this kind of stuff. I've lucked out because someone said, 'Okay, We'll give you the opportunity to see really what you can do.'"

Rainey is the Chicago offshoot in Wilson's cycle, set in 1927 in a seedy bandroom where musicians wait for their diva leader to begin a recording session that gradually grows into a microcosm of the subjugation of black Americans. The boys in the band identify themselves in conversational riffs, the most compelling being the boisterous, ambitious youngblood on trumpet--Dutton's character, Levee--who hopes to replace Ma Rainey on the bandstand and in the bedroom (with her gal pal). It won't be his night.

Ma arrives late in the play, with her retinue and diva demands on parade, and gives the show a good shaking. "I think arriving late is probably, ultimately, going to be a good thing--especially with eight show a week," Goldberg says with a laugh. "Ma Rainey is the equivalent of a hurricane in 1920's America. She's going to do her thing her way, and for her to be that strong and that powerful is a pretty remarkable thin for that time."

[[image: photograph of Charles S. Dutton]] [[caption]] "Your body talks to you in an entirely different way after 19 years. It's like a sport you did. If you played it well . . . your muscles are so in tune to that event that you'll still be good at it regardless."
 --Dutton [[/caption]]

Dutton is enjoying this ride back in the time machine and, in fact, had a lot to do with engineering it: "I thought this would be a great August Wilson play to redo, simply because it was the first. Initially, for me, it was pretty much all about bringing back as many members of the original cast and the director, Lloyd Richards. Then the older folks started passing away--Theresa Merritt, Joe Seneca, Robert Judd--so I approached Whoopi in 1992 about a revival, and she thought it was a great idea. For almost a decade, when we ran into each other, we'd talk



about it, but there were scheduling problems."

The march of time posed a problem, too--but that was rectified with casting strategy and a dialogue touch-up. "I was 37 when we first did it, and the older guys were in their late fifties. This time we found guys in their seventies. And there was this line where someone says, 'I've been handling him for 32 years.' Now it's 'I've been handling him all these years.'"

But this didn't cover all of Dutton's bases "Your body talks to you in an entirely

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[[image of a cursor]] PURE THEATRE ONLINE [[/footer]]

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[[image and caption runs across two columns of type]]
[[image: photograph of a PLAYBILL issue showing sign for LYCEUM and sign for Whoopi Goldberg]] [[image: photograph of a quartet, (piano, trombone, bass, trumpet.)]] [[photo credit]] BERT ANDREWS [[/photo credit]]
[[caption for both photos]] Left: A PLAYBILL for Goldberg's Broadway debut; Below (l.-r.): Dutton, Robert Judd, Leonard Jackson and Joe Seneca in the original production of August Wilson's Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.

different way after 19 years. It's like a sport you did. If you played it well, you may not be able to leap as high or run as fast, but your muscles are set in tune to that event that you'll still be good at it regardless. I learned, after one week's rehearsal, everything started coming back. It hasn't hit me yet what I've learned about the role in 19 years because I thought I was pretty full the first time so I'm just having a good time with it..

"It's a little bittersweet, too, because I hear those original voices--Theresa's and Joe's and Robert's--so it's emotional for me. As soon as I knew this was real, that we were going to do this play, I flew in to New York and stood in front of the Royale on 45th St. and soaked up the vibes. I remember I did the same thing when Ma Rainey opened at the Cort in 1984. Once I knew the theatre we'd be in, I'd stand out in front of it and look up at the marquee and get that vibe. It's strange, but you know actors do strange things."

[[advertisement]]
[[image: color photograph of a large, costumed cast.]]
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