



**Smithsonian Institution**

*National Museum of African American History and Culture*

## **Playbill for Ma Rainey's Black Bottom**

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Derek Jacobi is best known here for television's I Claudius

at the Royal Shakespeare Company has in a sense been 20 years overdue. A golden boy of Britain's National Youth Theatre and then of Cambridge undergraduate acting circles, he progressed straight from college to the Birmingham Repertory Company at a time when it was traditional that the leading man there was invited at the end of the season to audition for Stratford:

"Lined up on the stage there were all the 1963 directors -- Peter Hall, Peter Brook, John Barton, Michel St. Denis--they asked me if I'd like to give them something so I gave them 'To Be or Not To Be,' and a few days later there came an embarrassed note from Peter Hall saying that it was Not To Be."

Instead Jacobi went to the founding season at Chichester where Laurence Olivier was building up the first British National Theatre company, and with that company he stayed for the next eight years, working his way through the ranks from spears to leading classical roles at the Old Vic in everything from Noel Coward's Hay Fever to Laertes in O'Toole's Hamlet. Then followed a period in films and television (most notably, of course, the stammering title role in I Claudius) and a return to the classical stage when the RSC at last rang with a sizeable offer and "the telephone went red hot in my hands." Though he still has hopes of one day making "the really big film, just to see what it feels like," there's no doubt that Jacobi is most at home on the classical stage, whether barnstorming the world with the RSC or working in the most intimate surroundings of one of their London or Stratford studio stages. Not that this will be his Broadway debut: He was last here with the short-lived Suicide in 1980.

This time things are looking a good deal more promising for him, as indeed they are for Sinead Cusack: The current Roxane-Beatrice double rounds off a memorable seven year stint with the RSC during which time she has managed to shake off all the labels she first acquired as "Cyril Cusack's daughter" and "Jeremy Iron's wife" and establish herself as one of the best classical actresses of her mid-30's generation. Though she could probably have stayed forever in work at the Abbey Theatre Dublin as a member of Ireland's leading theatrical family, she came to England at 21 and achieved early if soon-abandoned stardom in a forgettable Peter Sellers movie called Hoffman. She also achieved considerable gossip-column fame as a girlfriend of the footballer George Best, none of which made it exactly easy for her to persuade the RSC that they should be taking her seriously as a classical actress.

But by the mid-1970's she was starring with Irons (they now have a son called Sam) in the second cast of Wild Oats at the RSC's London base, and since then, while he was off to Brideshead and The French Lieutenant's Woman, she stayed with the company, working her way up to a fiery Kate in Taming of the Shrew and the current Broadway double as well as a Portia in Merchant of Venice and Lady Anne in Richard III.

"For years I was dreadfully typecast in films and television because I have this round face, blue eyes and blonde hair: It was the RSC who taught me that there was a lot more to being an actress. Imagine: They give you eight weeks rehearsal in Stratford, then another eight weeks in London and another eight before you go off on tour. If you can't get it right by then, there must be something very wrong with you."

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But despite her recent arrival at classical status, Miss Cusack remains a fiery and very funny lady. When she was first living with Irons during the run of Wild Oats and discovered that she was pregnant, she waited until he was about to go on for his big scene at the matinee. Then, backstage, she whispered the news to him: "wickedly unprofessional," as she says, "but very enjoyable."

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