



Smithsonian Institution

National Museum of African American History and Culture

Playbill for Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

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A VIEW FROM THE AUDIENCE

by Lina Lofaro

[[image - black and white photograph of Dustin Hoffman]]
INGE MORATH

On meeting Dustin Hoffman

I was so moved by Dustin Hoffman's performance in *Death of a Salesman* that I wrote him a letter and sent it to the Broadhurst Theatre. Realistically, I knew it would probably never reach him, but, remember, I was listening to my heart.

That was Monday, April 16. Exactly one week later, I received a message upon returning to my desk after lunch. It said, "Call Lee in Dustin Hoffman's office." My heart began to palpitate so rapidly, I thought it was going to burst through my rib cage!

When I finally stopped trembling long enough to telephone Lee, he said something to the effect that Dustin Hoffman had received my letter, that he was very touched by it and would like to arrange for me to see the play again as his guest and to come backstage afterwards to meet him.... Please note, while he is saying this, I am dying.

D-Day arrived. Saturday, May 26. It was Memorial Day weekend. Ironic how I wondered a few weeks earlier what I would be doing for that upcoming holiday. My sister Terri, my best friend mind you (except for a few hours at a time following an argument), was in London on vacation and I couldn't ramble on with other friends—they might not have taken to it. My sister is stuck with me.

I had already decided what I was going to wear one week earlier. I had bought three new pairs of shoes; about three new blushes and five different nail polishes! Would he notice my nails? Of course not! But I would!

That evening it rained, and I got caught in it. Wonderful, my hair was frizzed! But, I said, calm down, however it goes not, it's going to go. An usher assured me my name would be on a list at the stage door following the performance. I wasn't going to let anything go wrong!

As Dustin Hoffman came onstage, his two heavy suitcases weighing him down, the audience greeted him with their applause. His voice, to me, seemed too tired, perfect for Willy Loman, but too weary for Dustin Hoffman. I thought the play was taking its toll on him. His responses appeared to be deeper this time than the last. He exploded much more readily, he cried more easily. I was amazed.

When the curtain fell on the last act, amid my own and everyone else's tears and applause so wild it seemed that even the ceiling was standing up for the ovation, it dawned on me that I would soon meet the man that all this was for. I moved timidly to the stage door, and yes, my name was on the list. I was the last person to arrive. I was asked to sign in. I glanced at the



other names. If a big star was there, Dustin Hoffman would probably be too occupied. But, no one's name seemed recognizable, except mine! I went downstairs and waited in an area where a number of people had congregated, including his wife. Then he came down.

He was wearing a baseball cap to conceal the partially bald head, which was required for the role. He spoke to three people from a Community Theatre where he had directed a play in the mid-60's. They presented him with a large plaque, and he signed about 15 PLAYBILLS for them. Next he met a friend of John Malkovich's and then two people that knew his wife.

Now came my turn.

After he had spoken to his wife's two friends, he saw me standing alone over to the side. Then Dustin Hoffman came over

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Channel Thirteen PBS

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