AUGUST WILSON’S
MA RAINNEY’S
BLACK BOTTOM

WRITTEN BY AUGUST WILSON
DIRECTED BY RON OJ PARSON

Begins February 6th
Performed in the Alexandra C. and John D. Nichols Theatre
Dear Friends,

Happy New Year!

We’re excited to celebrate this new year with our first production of an August Wilson play, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, and to welcome back Ron OJ Parson, one of the foremost directors of Wilson’s work, to helm our production! Wilson’s remarkably beautiful and poetic language draws us deeply into the extraordinary dramatic conflict between ambition, desperation and love for the blues, and we can’t wait for you to experience this Chicago-based chapter of his *The American Century Cycle*!

In this issue of The Brief Chronicle, we’ll provide some background on the extraordinary work of August Wilson, and introduce you to Ron OJ Parson, the director of our production. We’ll also provide a bit of background on Gertrude “Ma” Rainey herself—the real musician on whom the character is based. You’ll also have a chance to meet our gifted cast and hear about their first experiences with August Wilson’s work.

Later, we’ll spotlight our special ACTIVATE program—a component of our extensive Education programming that engages with students who attend a matinee at WT, deepening the experience and providing additional context with pre and post-attendance workshops.

Additionally, please be sure to check out the Lean Forward and Engage section of the magazine to discover a wealth of additional opportunities to explore and interact with the work on our stages, and explore the Accessibility section to learn about services that are available at WT, such as ASL-interpreted performances, open captioning and much more.

Now, we invite you to lean forward and engage with August Wilson’s masterpiece: *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*!

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Kathryn M. Lipuma
Executive Director

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Executive Director

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STATE OF THE ART
by Michael Halberstam, Artistic Director

There are so many reasons to be excited about this production of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom. It’s hard to know where to begin. As a theatre in which the word is the primary source of inspiration, we should start with the playwright. August Wilson justly earned his place in the pantheon of great American writers for the theatre with his astonishing historic cycle of dramas chronicling the experience of African Americans over the course of the 20th century. With soaring language, richly drawn characters, humor, pathos and superbly structured narratives, he brings the racial history of this nation into the hearts and souls of audiences. Ron OJ Parson is, in my estimation, the nation’s premier interpreter of Mr. Wilson’s work. Every time I see a fresh production of a Wilson play directed by Ron, I see the play as if for the first time. There is a fresh vibrancy in his realizations that brings the story to life in ways that feel immediate and utterly relevant to the times. Furthermore, he has assembled a simply astonishing cast to bring Ma Rainey to life in the Nichols Theatre.

August Wilson justly earned his place in the pantheon of great American writers for the theatre with his astonishing historic cycle of dramas chronicling the experience of African Americans over the course of the 20th century.

We all have blues and jazz albums in our collections. Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom reminds us how many of those albums came into fruition. I was flying home to Chicago from New York a decade or so ago. As is my usual habit when I fly, I try to lose myself in a book as I tend to find that the more I dwell upon the nature of what it actually means to be 35,000 feet or so above the earth in a small metal tube loaded with highly explosive fuel, the less comfortable I am with the paradigm. A short while into the flight when I got up to use the restroom I realized that the great blues singer Mavis Staples was sitting in the row behind me. There’s an unspoken rule in New York that you allow celebrities their own space but eventually, the silence was broken by someone asking her if she was indeed Mavis Staples. She acknowledged the fact and to the delight of all around her answered a few questions with grace and generosity. Eventually, someone asked her jokingly why she was flying economy. The answer wasn’t funny. She explained carefully that despite her prolific recording career, she had seen little of the profits from her recordings. The exploitation of black artists by primarily white institutions and individuals has been endemic throughout history. Some of it is motivated by greed and some by ignorance. Regardless, the end result is the perpetuation of systemic racism.

Conversations about race are still at the forefront of the national conversation and rightly so. We only have to look at our own city, divided predominantly along racial lines, in order to see how problematic and real the issues are. And yet so much of the dialogue we are engaging in can feel overwhelming and frustrating, and as with all significant challenges that emerge from the state of being human, they are incredibly complicated. Furthermore, despite the media’s (and especially social media’s) attempts to oversimplify the issues, they remain complex and gray in the way that being alive is complex and gray. And this is where art comes into play. Great art thrive in complexity and shades of gray. Artistic expression gives us the opportunity to have a personal engagement with issues that can seem distancing and overwhelming. Art allows us to approach epic dialogues from a personal place and when we can approach the great concerns of our times with empathy and nuance, we have a greater hope of dealing with them.

Thank you for continuing to join the conversations at Writers Theatre. We’re very lucky to have you in our audience. Leaning forward and engaging means active participation with the conversations on our stages. Laugh, cry, gasp and, best of all, recognize that the person next to you might be having a different experience—relish that moment! That’s one of the many wonderful aspects of going to the theatre that allows us to celebrate the diversity of human experience.
ABOUT THE PLAY

ORIGINS

The beginnings of August Wilson’s American Century Cycle

By Seph Mozes, Dramaturgy Intern

Over the course of his life, from 1945 to 2005, August Wilson wrote seventeen plays, as well as poetry, short stories, and essays, and garnered a staggering number of awards and accolades for his work.

Although he had not yet officially embarked on the project when he wrote it, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom would become the second play of August Wilson’s ten-play American Century Cycle. These works explore the heritage and experience of African-Americans, decade by decade, over the course of the twentieth century. All of the plays, with the exception of Ma Rainey, are set in the neighborhood of Pittsburgh where Wilson grew up. No direct narrative through-line exists between the plots of the plays, although certain characters or their children appear in many of them.

Wilson has described these plays as tragedies, but his foremost interest as a playwright was in exploring “the value of Black culture” and the human condition through the lens of the African-American experience. “Black life is large enough;” Wilson said, “there is no idea that it cannot contain.” He often cited James Baldwin’s call for “a profound articulation of the Black tradition,” defined as “that field of manners and rituals of intercourse that could sustain a man once he’s left his father’s house,” as the guiding principle of his work.

The playwright Tony Kushner described Wilson as “a giant figure in American theater. Heroic is not a word one uses often without embarrassment to describe a writer or playwright, but the diligence and ferocity of effort behind the creation of his body of work is really an epic story.”

When the future playwright was twelve, he discovered the Negro literature section at the local public library. “I read Invisible Man, Langston Hughes, and all the thirty or forty books in the section,” he said in 1997. He attended an all-white Catholic school until the age of fourteen, when racist harassment from his peers forced him to transfer to his local public school. He then dropped out of high school at age fifteen after being accused of plagiarizing a history paper. At eighteen, he enlisted in the U.S. Army for three years, but left after serving only one year.

In 1965, the twenty-year-old moved to Pittsburgh and lived among writers and painters. It was that year that he began calling himself August Wilson, instead of his birth name, Frederick August Kittel, Jr. For the next twelve or thirteen years, he supported himself with a series of jobs—dishwasher, short-order cook, porter, stock boy, gardener, and mail room clerk. In his early twenties, Wilson began writing poetry on a typewriter he had bought with the $20 his sister gave him for writing a term paper for her. He also began to listen seriously to blues recordings of the 1930s and ‘40s. Wilson dated his acquaintance with the blues as the moment he heard Bessie Smith’s recording of “Nobody Can Make a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine.” He played the record twenty-two straight times, as he recalled in 1988: “Just over and over. I had never heard anything like it. I was literally stunned by its beauty...this spoke to something in myself. It said, this is yours.”

The blues, he said, communicated to him that “there was a nobility to the lives of Blacks in America which I didn’t always see... After I discovered the blues, I began to look at the people in the [rooming] house a little differently than I had before. I began to see a value in their lives that I simply hadn’t seen before. I discovered a beauty and nobility in their struggle to survive. I began to understand the fact that the avenues for participation in society were closed to these people and that their ambitions had been thwarted, whatever they may have been. The mere fact that they were still able to make this music was a testament to the resiliency of their spirit.”

In 1966, Wilson and friends started a small magazine, and Wilson became the poetry editor. The magazine then evolved into the Center Avenue Poets’ Theatre Workshop. Two years later, Wilson founded the Black Horizons Theatre with fellow writer Rob Penny, who became the company’s editor. The magazine then evolved into the Center Avenue Poets’ Theatre Workshop. Two years later, Wilson founded the Black Horizons Theatre with fellow writer Rob Penny, who became the company’s in-house playwright. Despite having never seen a play before, Wilson directed plays by Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins and others, before the group folded in 1971. Throughout the late 60s and early 70s, Wilson continued to publish poetry and short stories, and was inspired to begin writing one-act plays after seeing South African playwright Athol Fugard’s play Sizwe Banzi is Dead in 1976. He wrote a series of one-act plays which were produced by community theaters in Pittsburgh.

Because he felt his early poetry had been very derivative, when Wilson did turn to playwriting, he deliberately avoided reading the classics. In 1987, the year he wrote his Pulitzer Prize-winning Fences, he said, “I haven’t read Ibsen, Shaw, Shakespeare—except The Merchant of Venice in ninth grade . . . I’m not familiar with Death of a Salesman. I haven’t read Tennessee Williams.” The foundation for his writing, he said, was not dramatic writing but poetry. “I think I write the kind of plays I do,” he later said, “because I have twenty-six years of writing poetry underneath all of that.”

Over ten days in 1979, writing in a fish and chips restaurant, Wilson completed an early version of a play called Jitney, which he later submitted to the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center’s National Playwrights Conference, only to have it rejected, two years in a row. However, in 1981 Wilson did receive a $2,500 fellowship for Jitney from the Playwrights’ Center of Minneapolis, where he was able to develop several of his early plays. He began work on Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom that year.

Wilson had not yet conceived his epic American Century Cycle when he wrote Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom and Jitney (the exclamation mark was removed when the revised version of the play was produced in 1996). As he explained in 1991, “I wrote a play called Jitney! set in ’71 and a play called Fullerton Street [which did not end up as part of the cycle] that I set in ’41. Then I wrote Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, which I set in ’27, and it was after I did that that I said, ‘I’ve written three plays in three different decades, so why don’t I just continue to do that?’” Partly because he had not yet planned out the cycle when he wrote it, Ma Rainey is the only play in the cycle that does not take place in Pittsburgh.

In 1982, Lloyd Richards, then Dean of the Yale School of Drama and Artistic Director of the Eugene O’Neill Theatre Center’s National Playwrights Conference, read Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom and gave it a reading at that summer’s National Playwrights Conference. Two years later, the play received its world premiere at the Yale Repertory Theatre, opening on April 6, 1984 under Richards’ direction. Several months later, on October 11, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom opened on Broadway and ran for 285 performances. It was Wilson’s first play to go to Broadway, and every play in his American Century Cycle would eventually be produced on Broadway as well.

Wilson would continue workshopping his new plays at the Yale Repertory and the O’Neill Center in Connecticut, as well as at Huntington Theatre Company in Boston, Goodman Theatre in Chicago, and various theatres in Pittsburgh. His American Century Cycle would be produced around the country and the world. Two of the plays, Fences and The Piano Lesson, would go on to win Pulitzer prizes. He also won Great Britain’s Olivier Award for Jitney, as well as eight New York Drama Critics Circle Awards. This last achievement is remarkable given that since the award was inaugurated in 1936, only Tennessee Williams (who won the award four times) had won it more than twice. Wilson was awarded a 1999 National Humanities Medal by the President of the United States and received numerous honorary degrees from colleges and universities. In his 2005 obituary of Wilson, Washington Post drama critic Peter Marks wrote, “The death of August Wilson does not simply leave a hole in the American theater, but a huge, yawning wound, one that will have to wait to be stitched closed by some expansive, poetic dramatist yet to emerge.”

Ma Rainey is often called the “Mother of the Blues” by music historians. Living Blues magazine quotes her piano player, Thomas Dorsey, as saying she was a big star from “way back there about 1912.”

Ma Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett in Columbus, Georgia, in 1886, and her mother moved her to Chicago when Ma was nine. She began her career as a dancer in traveling minstrel shows, but soon moved to singing and acting. By 1903, she was headlining her own show, her rendition of “You Got What I’m After” becoming one of her first hits. By the early 1900s, she was moving among the vaudeville and music hall circuits, opening for stars like Will Rogers, Claude Williams, and Ethel Waters. She married William “Pa” Rainey in 1908 and continued to perform together, even after Ma was declared the headliner and Pa was reduced to accompanying her on the piano. He died in 1917.

In the 1915-1916 season, Ma Rainey and her husband moved to New York City and opened a popular variety show, “Rainey and Rainey, Assassinators of the Blues.” For her performance, Ma Rainey would emerge in a decadent tiara, gown, and necklace of $20 gold pieces, often holding a gun in one hand and an ostrich feather in the other. After the Musical Extravaganza tour, Ma Rainey was so popular her shows were integrated in 1917, with half the tent designated to white patrons and half to Black patrons. If there was overflow, sometimes the patrons sat in mixed audiences just to
Ma Rainey was a wild entertainer but she was also a shrewd businesswoman. Her employees were not allowed to drink the evening of a show, and she traveled with a choreographer and a troupe of dancers. She was known for being a strict boss who kept her team on point, but not a cruel one.

Ma Rainey migrated to Chicago in the early 1920s after parting company with her performance partner and husband Pa Rainey to pursue a solo career. Chicago was home to a vibrant blues scene but lacked stars that transcended the city. Ma Rainey became the first woman many recall hearing sing the blues, and it was here in Chicago that the singer would legitimize country blues and enjoy the majority of her stardom. She signed with Paramount Records in 1923 and made her first recordings, after having been a live performer for more than two decades. The success of her recordings is often credited with saving the label in its early days, and she would record close to one hundred songs between 1923 and 1928. Early musicians such as Blind Lemon Jefferson (1883-1929) also migrated to Chicago in the early 20s and were playing in clubs, but Jefferson didn’t start recording with Paramount until 1926, three years after Ma Rainey.

A queer woman, Rainey often sang of same sex relationships in songs like “Prove it on Me,” and was known for sometimes preferring women to men. So much so, the cover for that record is Ma in a suit and fedora flirting with young women while a cop looks on from across the street. Bessie Smith, a contemporary of Ma Rainey’s referred to as “the Queen of the Blues” and whom Rainey probably coached while on tour in their early careers, is also said to have had a variety of lovers. Because of this cheeky, up front way of doing things, Ma Rainey was a forerunner of the ‘parody blues’ that would be sung by artists like Lil Green. They could make fun of their romantic partners without fearing repercussion in songs like “Why Don’t You Do Right?” penned by Chicago blues writer Kansas Joe McCoy in 1936 and later made popular by Peggy Lee.

Ma Rainey’s influence on blues musicians and the blues scene of the time cannot be underestimated. She shared billings with Bessie Smith, T-Bone Walker, Georgia Tom Dorsey and Tampa Red. She would even travel up to New York City and cut sides with Louis Armstrong and Buster Bailey. It is said that Rainey had a lasting influence on Armstrong, and that he adopted many of her performance techniques into his stage presence. Ma Rainey had a unique style that she refused to change, and she loved being professional and cutting records only in the manner she deemed appropriate. She was not going to let a label dictate her sound.

The Great Depression took a toll on the popularity of blues music, and Ma Rainey was not willing to adapt her music to fit the style of the times. Ma Rainey was back to touring live again by the early 1930s with significantly less wealth. In 1935, she retired to her hometown of Columbus, Georgia to manage two theaters. She died there four years later at the age of 53. Although her career did not survive the Great Depression, the popularity of the country-fied blues she generated would persist well after she died. In 1932, BlueBird records would emerge as a division of RCA, and dominate the Chicago blues market, producing artists such as Big Bill Broonzy and Sonny Boy Williamson. In fact, most of the prominent male Chicago blues star, such as Muddy Waters, Buddy Guy or Willie Dixon, were active from the late 1930s to early 1960s, long after Ma Rainey had passed on.

The legacy of Ma Rainey was affirmed with her induction into the Blues Foundation Hall of Fame in 1983 and the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame (an an “early influence”) in 1990. The singer’s childhood home is now the Ma Rainey House and Blues Museum. In Daphne Duval Harrison’s book about early female Blues vocalists, *Black Pearl*, the author has this to say in tribute to the legendary singer: “The good-humored, rollicking Rainey loved life, loved love, and most of all loved her people. Her voice bursts forth with a hearty declaration of courage and determination—a reaffirmation of black life.”

pictures:
- The Liberty Theatre in Columbus, Georgia. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia Commons.
- Bessie Smith, an early blues singer, known for her powerful voice. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia Commons.
- The Historic Columbus, Georgia home of Ma Rainey. Photo courtesy of Wikipedia Commons.
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DIRECTED BY ROBIN WITT

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Join us for these exciting events, tailored to enhance your WT experience! For more information and to RSVP visit writerstheatre.org/events.

**SUNDAY SPOTLIGHT**
This free one-hour event about the themes of the play begins at 11:30am, leaving you plenty of time for coffee or lunch before the 2pm Sunday matinee performance begins! Seating is limited, RSVP is required. Past audiences have discussed ghost stories and their legacies for The Hunter and The Bear with Randall Colburn, culture writer for The AV Club and Consequence of Sound, and dug into the legacy of the Leo Frank case in Parade with Rabbi Steve Lowenstein from An Shalom.

Save the date for the Sunday Spotlight for Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom on Sunday, March 3rd at 11:30am before the matinee performance.

**THE MAKING OF…**
Join us for an engaging Q&A to look at the making of a production from a new perspective. Seating is limited, RSVP is required. Past events have featured scholars on hip-hop and rap for Vietgone, how the choreography of Company came together and what it was like for the cast of Arcadia to be the first performers in the Nichols Theatre.

Save the date for The Making of… Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom on Monday, March 11th at 6:30pm.

**FROM PAGE TO STAGE**
Writers Theatre and select North Shore libraries and community partners are proud to present this series of special events, lectures and workshops designed to enhance your appreciation of the art. From Page to Stage is generously sponsored by Randy L. and Melvin R. Berlin. For an up-to-date list of new events, visit writerstheatre.org/fpts.

**WT FILM SERIES**
For the third year in a row, we are excited to present this curated film series to complement our six productions. Join us for these special screenings and compare themes with the plays in our 2018/19 season. RSVP is requested, $10 admission.

Save the date for Mo’ Better Blues on Sunday, February 24 at 2:00pm. Hosted by the Wilmette Theater, 1122 Central Ave, Wilmette.

**POST-SHOW CONVERSATION: THE WORD**
Join us after every Tuesday evening performance (excluding First Week and any extension weeks) of every production in our 2018/19 Season for a 15-minute discussion of the play facilitated by a member of the WT Artistic Team.

**POST-SHOW CONVERSATION: THE ARTIST**
Join us after every Wednesday evening performance (excluding First Week and any extension weeks) of every production in our 2018/19 Season for a 15-minute discussion with actors from the production facilitated by a member of the WT Artistic Team.

**PRE-SHOW CONVERSATION: UP CLOSE**
Join us at 6:45pm in the Atrium before every Thursday evening performance (excluding First Week and any extension weeks) for a 15-minute primer on the context and content of the play, facilitated by a member of the WT Artistic Team.

**SOCIAL HOUR AT WT**
Remember that our Concessions Center is open for an hour before and after our performances. You are welcome to enjoy a snack or beverage and discuss the play in the Litowitz Atrium, on our Grand Gallery Walk or on the Stephanie and Bill Sick Rooftop Terrace.
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Ron OJ Parson: There From the Beginning

By Bobby Kennedy, Director of New Work & Dramaturgy

Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom was the play that thrust August Wilson into the national spotlight. And Ron OJ Parson was there for its opening night.

After graduating from the theatre program at the University of Michigan, Parson had moved to New York with several friends to make a career as an actor. Although he chose to pursue his master’s degree at Rutgers University, several of his friends—including actors David Alan Grier and Reg Cathey and playwright Oyamo—enrolled in the program at Yale University.

Another friend that Parson had met in New York, and who had gotten the aspiring actor/director a job in a telemarketing office, was Charles “Roc” Dutton. Dutton would tell him, “there’s this guy at Yale writing a play for me and it’s going to change my life,” Parson recalls. While visiting his friends up at Yale in the early 1980s, he got to meet this at-that-point unknown playwright named August Wilson, who was working on a play called Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.

When the premiere of that play moved from Yale to Broadway in 1984, with Charles Dutton in the role of Levee, Parson got a ticket to opening night from his friend. He remembers how incredible it was to be there on such a historic night. “No stars, an unknown playwright. The average tourist audience didn’t know anything about it. They thought it was a musical. I was in the bathroom at intermission and people were saying ‘there needs to be more music. I
thought it was about Ma Rainey. It’s about Levee. It’s a play about being a black man in America.”

A few years later, Parson returned to his hometown of Buffalo, thinking he might get out of the theatre industry altogether. While in Buffalo, the Paul Robeson Theatre offered him the opportunity to direct a play, and Parson chose to direct Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, his first time directing one of Wilson’s plays. He also starred as Levee in that production.

Getting to direct Wilson’s work reinvigorated Parson and, after moving to Chicago in 1994, he once again crossed paths with the now famous playwright. Parson worked as an understudy on Goodman Theatre’s production of Jitney in 1999. Wilson was continuing to refine the script as it made its way through regional theatre on its way to a New York run, and Parson spent as much time as possible watching the playwright at work.

Parson channeled all of this knowledge of Wilson’s plays into his directing career. In 2000, as the inaugural production for the new Congo Square Theatre Company in Chicago, Parson directed Wilson’s play The Piano Lesson. Wilson was in Chicago at the time, working on Goodman Theatre’s production of another of his plays, King Hedley II, and came to see Parson’s production at the tiny Chicago Dramatists space. The playwright was very impressed, calling it one of the best productions of the play he’d seen, and soon Wilson began recommending Parson as a director when theatres wanting to produce his plays asked for recommendations on who to hire.

One of those recommendations led to Parson directing a production of Fences at Portland Stage in Maine. When Chicago’s Court Theatre decided they wanted to stage Fences, they asked Portland Stage who had directed their production and discovered that there was a fantastic interpreter of Wilson’s work based right here in Chicago. Parson has now directed 7 of Wilson’s 10 plays at Court Theatre: Fences, The Piano Lesson, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Jitney, Seven Guitars, Gem of the Ocean, and Radio Golf.

When asked about if he ever imagined he would get to do most of Wilson’s plays at a major Chicago theatre, he says, honestly, “Nope. I was a freelancer. It was a job and I was on to the next one.” But given the success of Fences, Court Theatre and the Joyce Foundation joined forces to make Parson a Resident Artist at the theatre, so he could keep regularly directing plays (including Wilson’s) on the south side of Chicago.

The Writers Theatre production of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom will be Parson’s 5th time directing the play, and his 26th time directing a play of August Wilson’s. But Parson passionately rejects any suggestion that he might be tiring of the playwright’s work. “This playwright is one of the great playwrights,” he asserts. “August Wilson has ten plays. A lot of major playwrights have four or five that get done regularly. But he’s got ten well-known ones that get done all the time.”

There is always something new for Parson to discover while working on a Wilson play. For this production, he’ll have several new elements. Felicia Fields played the role of Ma Rainey in Goodman Theatre’s 1997 production, but she and Parson haven’t done the show together before. And Kelvin Roston, Jr. will be stepping into the lead role of Levee, after having played the supporting role of Sylvester in Court’s 2009 production of the play.

Most boldly, Parson and his scenic designer Todd Rosenthal are making the set a former Bronzeville church that has been converted to a recording studio. And although the entire play takes place inside, he wants there to be elements that undeniably show that this play happens in Chicago. “Bronzeville has a rich musical, jazz/blues history,” says Parson. “Hopefully people will see elements from outside that are definitely Chicago.” After all, it’s the play of Wilson’s that has meant the most to the director over his long career, and it’s the only one set in the city he’s called home for so long.
Felicia P. Fields (Ma Rainey)

My first experience with this piece was in 1997 at the Goodman Theatre and it was also the first time I met Mr. August Wilson. I remember being very excited about the opportunity to work on such a project but what I remember most was Mr. Wilson being more connected to the men’s roles then he was to the women’s roles. Could be because there were more men’s roles to be concerned with and he was there for a brief period of time. It is fair to say, that I am certainly more seasoned in life and as an actress, to where I can embrace this role more now than I was able to back in 1997.

In a world where men are still primarily dominant in most aspects, women are just now beginning to find voice and in her time, Ma Rainey was fighting to be discovered and respected while knowingly being manipulated by the very men who profited from her charisma and her performance. She was very persistent in letting the men in her life know how aware she was of the inequality between men and women and her constant struggle for control was always at the forefront. Ma Rainey is a force to be reckoned with and I am so elated to have this opportunity to portray this powerful individual. Sometimes, it’s bad to get your blessing before you get your lesson.

Jalen Gilbert (Sylvester)

My first experience with August Wilson was during a college production of Joe Turner’s Come and Gone where I got to play Jeremy Furlow. It is still my favorite production simply because every time we rehearsed or performed it felt like a family cookout, family reunion, or just any Sunday at my Grandma’s house. There was always laughter, singing, loud unapologetic talking, and familial love. August Wilson’s writing leaped from the page and created that space for us to live fully both on and off stage.
A.C. Smith (Slow Drag)

I was first introduced to August Wilson in 1990 in New York when I was added to the National Broadway Tour of *The Piano Lesson* which ran for a little under a year. During that time I got to hang out with his family in Pittsburgh as well, from then on I was bitten by the August Wilson bug and went on to appear and perform in all ten of his plays at one time or another in regional theatres all across this country. I have received many awards and nominations for my work in those plays, and will continue to work on them as long as I am invited to.

Tiffany Renee Johnson (Dussie Mae)

My introduction to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was the fall of 2006, during the first semester of my last year of high school at Miami Northwestern. I got to witness my Drama teacher, Charlette Seward, play Ma Rainey and I loved every bit of it. That woman pushed me out of my comfort zone and challenged me in so many beautiful ways. I owe a lot of who I have grown into as an artist to her and her teachings. It was an honor to get to watch her in action. Now I've got to find her number, tell her I'm doing this show, and thank her for being so awesome.

David Alan Anderson (Toledo)

My first August Wilson experience was a store front community theatre production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*...at the now renowned Phoenix Theatre in Indianapolis. Bryan Fonseca, founding artistic director of the Phoenix, told me that although Levee was the role for me (I was much younger), he needed me to play "the old dude" Cutler. I was just happy for the work and the opportunity to tell stories of my ancestors. "A lot of words" we thought...but once we began reading out loud, I could hear the blues and jazzy rhythms. My blues, my rhythms. We eventually took that production to the Dundalk International Theatre festival in Dundalk, Ireland.

Thomas J. Cox (Sturdyvant)

My first August Wilson was seeing *Fences* directed by Ron OJ Parson at Court Theatre in 2006. AC Smith played Troy. I was very moved by his performance and by the entire play, as well as the discovery (for me) of this vibrant voice of the American Theatre, and of the African American experience. After seeing that production, I saw or read every play in the cycle that I could find.

My first experience of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was being in the cast of the Court Theatre’s production in 2009, again directed by Ron OJ. Having been so affected by his production of *Fences*, I was thrilled to get the chance to be directed by him. I felt welcomed into his process, while also being aware of the role of a white actor in August Wilson's work. It is a meaningful experience, as a white actor, to be in the minority of a cast of a theatre production in America, and important to experience a creative process from that perspective. It made me aware of my own privilege, and that awareness (I hope) made me a better member of the ensemble, and overall a better actor.

“Is there something that your character experiences in August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* or about the play in general that really resonates with you and intersects with your life?”

Kelvin Roston, Jr. (Levee)

Being a musician, I was a musical consultant on August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*. However, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* was the first of his plays that I performed in. I was in the role of Sylvester, the stuttering nephew. I truly enjoyed being able to bring him to life in my own way. It is such an honor to be revisiting *Ma Rainey*... in the role of Levee. He is quite a character. He wears his feelings on his sleeve and is quick to emotion, sometimes, because of things he experienced as a youth and throughout his life. There are people of all creeds and colors that can relate to that. However, he is an African-American male in 1927 Chicago. Consequently, it means something very specific for him which, unfortunately, still rings loudly true today.

David Alan Anderson

There is a conflict in the play that deals with the transition from one musical style to the next. I think it mirrors the struggles each generation has in understanding the next one. It also speaks to our need/desire to educate future generations of the accomplishments of our ancestors and the challenges they faced so that we could move forward. We stand on the shoulders of our ancestors.

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Peter Moore (Irvin)

It’s a minor miracle these days to gather a group of people together who are willing to shut down their devices and shut out the outside world for a couple of hours, to just sit and listen to someone else’s story, and engage in the experience and feel something, well, that’s another sort of miracle altogether. It’s what we strive for, and when so much of what passes for human interaction and discourse these days is through a screen, the opportunity theater offers us to come together and remind ourselves whom we’re all in this with is vitally important.

Tiffany Renee Johnson (Dussie Mae)

There is nothing in this world like live theatre. Watching a story unfold right before your eyes, is a magical experience that can bring forth visceral, incredible responses. That’s how I feel when I’m sitting in the audience. When I’m on the stage, it’s just as amazing. There is no space to stop and restart. There is only space to tell a story as truthfully as you can, with the most honest version of yourself. You’re listening, responding, and playing in real time. That’s irreplaceable.

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Thomas J. Cox (Sturdyvant)

Live theatre is important in our digital age because it is just that: LIVE! It is a communal experience of storytelling that we share, artists and audience, all in the same room at the same time. It is an intimate relationship, a contract between humans to join together in experiencing a story and how that story reflects and affects us. That joining together reminds us of our common humanity, something that at times seems lacking in our digital age.
SPOTLIGHT ON: ACTIVATE

ACTIVATE continues student engagement with art on the Writers Theatre stage!

ACTIVATE is Writers Theatre’s wraparound residency designed to deepen students’ engagement with the art on our stages, offered in-school before and after students attend a student matinee at WT. Last year, of the 1,352 students that WT welcomed to the theatre for TREVOR the musical and The Importance of Being Earnest, 1,226 students participated in ACTIVATE workshops in their classrooms. Through student matinees and ACTIVATE alone, WT reached 17 schools in both Chicago and the suburbs during the 2017/2018 Season—and we’re hoping to reach even more students with our 2018/2019 Student Matinee Series performances of Witch, Twelfth Night and Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom.

Last season, students participated in workshops examining a range of complex topics, from youth mental health, bullying and LGBTQ topics in our TREVOR the musical ACTIVATE workshops to classism and the intricacy of satire in The Importance of Being Earnest. Students participating in ACTIVATE workshops for our current season's student matinees will also get to dive deep into a range of fascinating and relevant issues like power structure, personal identity, prejudice, and racism. Under the guidance of a Writers Theatre Teaching Artist, students will form lasting connections to and an appreciation for the art-making process both aesthetically and academically.

Beyond their time with a WT Teaching Artist, students and teachers are also provided with Common Core-aligned, comprehensive study guides designed to continue the conversation beyond the students’ time at WT. Students also gain access to WT actors through in-depth post-show discussions, giving them the opportunity to get a “behind-the-scenes” peek at the life and work of an artist.

So far, 656 students from 7 schools have visited Writers Theatre to see one of our student matinees of Witch and Twelfth Night, 243 of which have also participated in an ACTIVATE workshop in their classroom. We are looking forward to offering three student matinees of the incredibly powerful Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, reaching approximately 750 of students from Winnetka to Englewood, continuing our mission of providing innovative educational programming to the students we serve.

TREVOR the musical

“This play gave me hope, and that I am not alone when I feel awful about life. There is help no matter what.”

“I loved the show and how relatable all the characters were, it has been my favorite play I've seen so far.”

“The activities we did challenged our way of thinking and I love that.”

“What I'll remember is that you should always be true to yourself. Learn to love and express who you really are, regardless of what others may think or say. Never let people define you.”

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST

“I enjoyed the fact that everything was personal. I could see every little facial expression the actors were making which made it even funnier.”

“The aura the actors created keeping the audience alive during every scene. The actors had great chemistry which made the play feel very realistic and entertaining.”

“From the Activate workshops, I learned to feel a little more confident in myself since I had to act and be silly in front of my whole class.”
ACCESSIBILITY SERVICES

Writers Theatre is committed to making our Theatre accessible for everyone. We are proud to offer Access Subscriptions and the following services:

For People with Mobility Difficulties
- Accessible parking spaces along Tudor Court
- Drop-off lane by the building’s main entrance
- Accessible entrances to the building
- Doorbell at the main entrance to request assistance with the front doors
- Courtesy wheelchair to assist with entering the building and theatre spaces
- Wheelchair-accessible seating *
- Elevator Access to second-level seating, Grand Gallery Walk and Stephanie and Bill Sick Rooftop Terrace and Garden

* Depending on your preference, you may transfer into a theatre seat or request to have the theatre seat removed to remain in the wheelchair. When purchasing your tickets, please let the Box Office know if you would like the theatre seat removed.

For People Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing
We are pleased to offer assistive listening devices in each of our performance spaces. Contact the Box Office with questions or for advance reservations. Assistive listening devices are offered free of charge.

In all of the performance spaces in our new theatre center, we have t-coil induction loop technology. For anyone with a telecoil built into their hearing aid or cochlear implant, by switching it on you will be able to hear our performances with additional amplification and clarity. Check with your audiologist for specific instructions on how to operate your personal telecoil-equipped device.

We are happy to connect you with scripts for our shows to read prior to your attendance. For details, review our Script Policy at writerstheatre.org/script-policy or contact the Box Office.

For People Who Are Blind or Have Low Vision
Large print programs are available at every performance at the Box Office.

Braille programs are available by prior request through the Box Office. Contact the Box Office at least two weeks prior to your scheduled performance with this request.

We can accommodate seating needs for guests with service animals. Contact the Box Office to request this accommodation.

Open-Captioned performance:
Thursday, March 14 at 7:30pm

ASL-Interpreted performance:
Saturday, March 16 at 7:30pm

Writers Theatre offers Open-Captioned and ASL-Interpreted performances on select dates for each production.

For additional information on accessibility services and subscriptions, contact access@writerstheatre.org or 847-242-6014.

The Accessibility Fund is a gift of Doris Conant and the Conant Family Foundation.

Box Office: 847-242-6000
WT BAR

WINE

RED
Ostatu Rosé ........................................................ $9
Amalaya Malbec .............................................. $9
Van Duzer Pino Noir ...................................... $8
La Garrigue du Midi Cabernet Sauvignon........ $12

WHITE
Santome Chardonnay ....................................... $8
Van Duzer Pino Gris ....................................... $8
Yorkville Cellars Sauvignon Blanc ...................... $9

SPARKLING
Charles de Fère Cuvée Jean Louis Blanc de Blancs $12
Fantinel Prosecco ........................................... $9
Nomikai Sparkling Rosé ................................... $9/$36

Our beer and wine products are subject to change, please ask your bartender for an up to date listing of our current selection.

BEER
Solemn Oath Snaggletooth Bandanda ................... $6
Vander Mill Totally Roasted ................................ $5
Two Brothers Domaine DuPage ......................... $5
Off Color Brewing Apex Predator ...................... $7
Metropolitan Afterburner ................................ $11

LIQUOR
A selection of Koval and other premium liquors

DESSERTS
Assorted cookies ............................................. $4
Assorted bars .................................................. $5
Ethereal Confections chocolate bar ..................... $7

ADDITIONAL CONCESSIONS
Coffee (Regular, Decaf) .................................... $3
Rishi Hot Tea (Chamomile, Earl Grey, Peppermint) $2
Soda (Coke, Diet Coke, Sprite, Ginger Ale) .......... $2
Water ............................................................... $2
CUSTOM COCKTAILS

Enjoy a custom cocktail from our Concessions Center—specially created for each of our productions by Mixed metaPours!

COLD NIGHT, HOT JAZZ // HOT NIGHT, COOL JAZZ
KOVAL BOURBON
TWO BROTHERS COFFEE LIQUEUR
HOT COFFEE // COLD BREW COFFEE
WHIPPED CREAM // HALF AND HALF

All of our signature cocktail creations are designed by WT Cocktail Consultant Cheryl Rich Heisler & Mixed metaPours.
312-613-7499 | www.mixedmetapours.com

STAY IN TOUCH WITH WRITERS THEATRE
JOIN THE CONVERSATION!
#MaRaineyWT

Share your thoughts on the show!

- Take this survey about August Wilson’s Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom: bit.ly/WTMaRainey
- Write a review of your experience on Yelp: bit.ly/WTonYelp
- Find us on Facebook: facebook.com/writers-theatre
- Follow us on Twitter: @WritersTheatre
- Follow us on Instagram: @writers_theatre
- Check in to Writers Theatre on Swarm
- Sign up for our email list to receive news updates, backstage stories, photos, videos and more: writerstheatre.org/email
- Follow our company on LinkedIn: linkedin.com/company/writers-theatre
- Join our circle on Google+

We look forward to hearing from you!
## AUGUST WILSON’S
### MA RAINEY’S BLACK BOTTOM

### FEBRUARY

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- **Private Event**
- **Post-Show Conversation**
- **Pre-Show Discussion**
- **The Making of...**
- **Sunday Spotlight**