Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Ma Rainey Lives!

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 14th, 2016

[alert type=alert-white]Please consider making a tax-deductible donation now so we can keep publishing strong creative voices.[/alert]

Sometimes, we need to be reminded of the creative miracles that now and then light up our stages, and Center Theatre Group at The Mark Taper Forum has not always done enough to spur such recollections. But in this fourth production of its 49th season — August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom,* the second piece in Wilson's celebrated cycle of plays illustrating black American life in each decade of the 20th century — the Taper has delivered a revival worthy of the playwright.

Wilson can be called the unofficial African American poet laureate of that century, replicating a language coined from slavery whose endemic music, indirection and humor underscores African American life with a depth of lyricism that the theatre had never really heard so clearly before he came along. Each play in Wilson's cycle tracks some persistently racist attitude plaguing black American life. But the tracking is always embedded in genuine drama, replete with riffs and amplifying events that fully earn the name of theatre. In the case of *Ma Rainey*, the play looks at the pernicious effect of the exploitation of black musicians in the 1920s at the hands of white producers.

Despite its title, *Ma Rainey* is as focused on the members of her band as it is on her. She is the anchor masking a larger point, a device that Wilson used in all his plays. This one centers on a recording session in Chicago — the only one of the cycle not set in Wilson's native Pittsburgh. The band's musicians have shown up on time but, because Ma Rainey is chronically (deliberately?) late, they spend the waiting time together in the "band room" shooting the breeze.

The four of them know each other well and it's not long before we get to know them too. There is the ambitious, touchy Levee (Jason Dirden) and the elder statesman Toledo (Glynn Turman) who has a knack for getting under Levee's skin. Then there are Cutler (Damon Gupton) and Slow Drag (Keith David) who spend some of their time quelling the brush fires that erupt between the other two. If this familiarity has its sharp edges, the biting humor is what drives the conversations, revealing quite a lot about what makes these men tick.

l-r: Jason Dirden, Damon Gupton, Glynn Turman and Keith David in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.*

By the time Ma Rainey (Lillias White) shows up with two young people in tow — her stuttering nephew Sylvester (Lamar Richardson) and Dussie Mae (Nija Okoro), a young woman in search of extracurricular action — the tension among the producer Sturdyvant (Matthew Henerson), his

sidekick Irvin (Ed Swidey) and the singer escalates, especially when Ma insists that stammering Sylvester should speak the opening words to the recording of her song.

l-r: Nija Okoro, Lillias White and Lamar Richardson in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

That is the broader story line, but it barely masks the object lesson or simmering deep divide between the white bosses and the black performers. There have been promises made that remain to be fulfilled and, in this world as we find out, broken promises can have wildly unforeseen consequences.

The splendid Phylicia Rashad has directed this production and the astuteness of her judgment is visible everywhere. Emilio Sosa designed the costumes, with Ma Rainey's signature gown deserving special mention. John Iacovelli provides a sober period set, well lit by Elizabeth Harper, but when it comes to sound, be aware that it can take a little time for the ear to adjust to the musicians' banter.

What you won't have trouble adjusting to is the excellent musicianship — and subtle performances — these fine actors bring to the stage.

Top image: l-r: Jason Dirden, Glynn Turman, Damon Gupton, Keith David and Lillias White in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom *at Center Theatre Group Mark Taper Forum.*

Lillias White as Ma Rainey in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

WHERE: Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum, 135 No. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90012

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Dark Mondays. Exceptions: No public performances Oct 4 – 7 (student matinees only). Ends Oct. 16.

HOW: Tickets $25-$85 (subject to change), available at (213) 628-2772 or online at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org or in person at the Center Theatre Group box office at The Ahmanson Theatre. Hot Tix, $25 each, may be purchased in advance or, subject to availability, on the day of performance at the box office (no checks). Groups: (213) 972-7231. Deaf community: visit CenterTheatreGroup.org/ProjectDATE.

MAKING IT ALMOST *ALL THE WAY*

Robert Schenkkan's *All the Way* is no minor undertaking.

Hugo Armstrong as LBJ in *All the Way* At South Coast Repertory.

The play, now at South Coast Rep, is a fictional construct of Lyndon Baines Johnson's chaotic first year in office following the Kennedy assassination and his sudden ascension to the presidency. It's 1963 and LBJ is working on ways to win election to his first full term in office, facing the escalating ramifications of the Vietnam War, while embroiled in complex political maneuverings for passage of the civil rights bill. The pressure is everywhere, from Martin Luther King, from the recalcitrant Southern whites, from other calculating power brokers, as well as his own mind's doubts about the wisdom of the entire enterprise.

Inevitably, the play revolves around LBJ's larger-than-life personality, his bluster and lip-

smacking relish for political machination, which makes *All the Way* a one-man show with a supporting cast of thousands.

Staged by Artistic Director Marc Masterson, this SCR production is polished to a high shine. The elegant symmetry of the colonnaded set by Ralph Funicello, supported by Shawn Sagady projections recreated by Kristin Ellert, reeks of roiling intrigue masked by the placid manicured surface of presentational Washington. Sound design and original music by Charles Coes and Nathan A. Roberts serves as a kind of sound track underscoring the action.

Those are the good points.

There is, however, something of a didactic dryness in the air. The long and talky first half does not deliver enough variety in words or actions to keep up momentum and interest as much as we wish it did. The second half fares better in both departments, delivering a lot more drama, suspense and even real feeling. But the scenes that include assorted civil rights protesters feel like stillborn re-enactments. This sort of stiffness often ails political plays of all stripes. Could Masterson have helped the situation more? Probably. After all, this play did win the 2014 Tony Award for Best Play.

The primary burden at all times is carried by LBJ, played here by the excellent Hugo Armstrong, who is not a natural fit for the 36th President. Makeup designer Kevin Haney has done a careful job of making him look as much as possible as the character he's portraying. Armstrong, who is tall and lean, with a narrower jaw than LBJ, does have the vocal chops to be the overbearing bully, but he does not quite possess the physical heft of the former President.

As always when you're contending with familiar public figures, the issue of whether or not to recreate their physiques in the theatre is a dicey affair. Schenkkan is on record saying that it should not be a primary concern, but it's also a difficult one to avoid. A semi-attempt is made at South Coast to be faithful to the public image whenever possible, but without losing sleep over it. This results in something of a mixed bag, with one exception. Larry Bates gives us a highly persuasive Martin Luther King (a role he also successfully took on earlier this year in *The Mountaintop* at Los Angeles' Matrix Theatre). He appears to have King's build and general demeanor but, more notably, he is able to perfectly capture the timber and speech patterns of King's voice.

l-r: Jordan Bellow, Larry Bates and Gregg Daniel in *All the Way* at South Coast Rep.

If this question of resembling actual people should not be a major issue, it becomes more of one when as towering a central figure as LBJ is not always strongly supported by an uneven supporting cast. J.D. Cullum's Hubert Humphrey tends to fade under LBJ's withering commands. Robert Curtis Brown's J. Edgar Hoover displays greater subtlety as he spars with the President, each man holding his own, even when Hoover is ultimately outfoxed by his wily opponent. Jeff Marlow does a good vocal imitation of Governor George Wallace, but in a cast of characters as large as this one and so much multiple casting, it is difficult for the lines not to blur and to keep identities straight.

Nike Doukas' delivers a fine Lady Bird Johnson and Lynn Gallagher is mostly recognizable as Lurleen Wallace, but these two women, who share a total of ten characters between them, have an even harder burden hanging on to who they are at any given time because the roles themselves are relatively minor and not easily differentiated.

Matthew Arkin, Lynn Gallagher, Jeff Marlow and Nike Doukas in *All the Way* at South Coast Rep.

Still, Schenkkan's play and the production deliver an incisive look into political events recent enough to capture our attention, especially in an election year as fraught as this one. At a running

time of three hours, however, it’s also difficult to escape the feeling that as much might have been accomplished in a swifter two-and-a-half.

Photos by Debora Robinson.

WHAT: ***All The Way***

WHERE: South Coast Repertory, 655 Town Center Drive, Costa Mesa, CA 92626.

WHEN: Evenings Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Sept.18, 20, 21 25, 27, 28 at 7:30pm; Thursdays-Saturdays, Sept. 15-17, 22-24, 29-Oct. 1 at 8pm.Matinees: Saturdays-Sundays, Sept. 17-18; Sept. 24-25, Oct. 1-2 at 2:30pm. ASL-interpreted: Saturday, Oct. 1, only at 2:30pm. Ends Oct. 2.

HOW: Tickets start at $22, available online at www.scr.org, by phone at (714) 708-5555 or at the Box Office, 655 Town Center Drive in Costa Mesa.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, September 14th, 2016 at 8:55 pm and is filed under Theatre
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.