

Sensory Guide for August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

Play Summary

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom is a play in 2 Acts with one 15-minute intermission. It is roughly 2 hours, 45 minutes long with the intermission included.

- Set in a recording studio in 1927 Chicago, blues singer **Ma Rainey** is recording her old favorites with her band: **Cutler**, **Slow Drag**, **Toledo**, and **Levee**. Accompanying Ma Rainey in recording are her lover **Dussie Mae** and nephew **Sylvester**. Also there is **Irvin**, Ma Rainey's white manager, and **Sturdyvant**, the white studio owner. Conflict ensues over the ownership of art, the history of racist and sexual violence, and the power dynamics between white producers and black musicians.

Things to be aware of

- **Haze** is used throughout the show (pre-show and intermission included). It has no odor but is present in the audience.
- Characters occasionally light and smoke **fake cigarettes** or **fake marijuana cigarettes** on stage. Smoke will be present.
- At the beginning of Act 1, there is a sound effect of **loud feedback noise** from testing an onstage microphone.
- There is **music** played in various moments of the show. Sometimes actors **sing** acapella, other times accompanied by live musical instruments, recorded music can also be heard.
- There are multiple **shiny props** and **sparkly costumes** used throughout the show.
- Two characters play brass instruments that are **shiny** and **light often reflects off them** into the audience. In particular, towards the **middle of Act 1, there are spotlights** on the trumpet player, Levee, that reflect onto the walls and into the audience.

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Things to be aware of

- Throughout the play there's repeated discussion of how **anti-Black racism** impacts the Black characters—in a range of ways that include **explicit violence, lynching, fear of lynching**, and **sexual assault**.
- Black characters will use the **slur** “nigger” throughout both acts. Characters also use **profanity** and/or **coarse language** throughout the play (fuck; motherfucker; shit; ass; whore; piss; titty; pussy, damn, goddamn; hell)
- There is a **long monologue** at the end of Act 1 by Levee describing a gang rape against a black woman by a white mob that is witnessed by a black child. This monologue also **describes other acts of racist violence**, including **lynching** and **burning** of a black man. This monologue is alluded to but not repeated in the middle of Act 2.
- In the middle of Act 2, Cutler has a monologue describing an act of **racist humiliation** against a black minister by a white mob.
- In the middle of Act 2, Levee will pull out a **straight razor** to threaten another character. At the end of the same act, Levee will **attack and kill** another character with it.

Please ask an usher (people in black clothing with a red “Yale Rep” nametag) if you have any questions about moments in the play.

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Characters



Ma Rainey
The lead singer.



Levee
The band's trumpet player.



Slow Drag
The band's upright bass player.

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Characters



Toledo

The band's piano player.



Cutler

the band's trombone player.

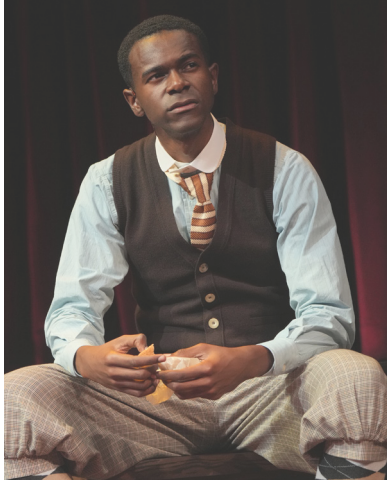


Irvin

Ma Rainey's manager.

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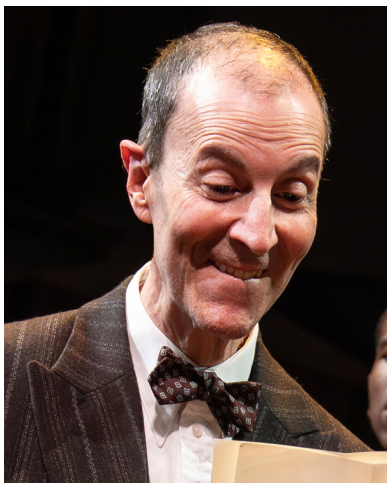
Characters



Sylvester
Ma's nephew.



Dussie Mae
Ma's friend.



Sturdyvant
The owner of the
recording studio.



Policeman