ARTS

"When autumn leaves start to fall, I remember it all"
EARLY AUTUMN WOODY HERMAN AND STAN GETZ

REVIEW

'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom' returns to Yale Rep with stunning cast

BY ZOE FROST
STAFF CRITIC

Before the lights come up on the University Theatre's stage, the set for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" opens up towards the audience, marked by dark wood paneling and bathed in a subtle warm light. An oriental rug lies downstage next to a rickety upright piano, and a plush armchair sits on stage right under a tasselled lamp. At center stage, illuminated by a thin spotlight, a single microphone waits to be filled with sound.

August Wilson's legendary play is one of 10 installments in his "Century Cycle," which chronicles the Black experience in 20th-century America. The only story of the cycle set outside of Pittsburgh, "Ma Rainey's" follows the legendary Black singer Ma Rainey, dubbed the "Mother of the Blues," as she records an album in 1927 Chicago. The play premiered at the Rep in 1982 and is returning home this month, directed by Timothy Douglas DRA '86.

The entirety of the play takes place over the course of an afternoon in a small recording studio with three rooms: the bandroom with its big red rug, the lobby with its armchair and the engineers' booth watching over it all. Each space is marked by dark wood paneling and bathed in warm light, but behind their aesthetic cohesion lie distinct social and racial divisions.

In the opening scene, two white men in three-piece suits stand in the empty studio, testing microphones. Sturdyvant, the studio owner, makes his way up the long staircase at the back wall of the set to the little gray booth that hangs seemingly in midair above the stage. When he addresses Ma Rainey's manager Irvin over the microphone, Irvin yells back, "I can't talk to you like that through the goddamn horn!"

This tiff exemplifies the communication issues that persist throughout the play between the white executives in the engineers' booth to the Black artists in the band room. Only the record executives set foot in the booth, where they handle money and call for recording to start and stop. Farthest from them, four steps down from the rest of the stage, is the band room. When the four instrumentalists, all Black men, arrive, they are sent downstairs to rehearse but mostly end up having heated discussions about musicianship, race and the existence of God.

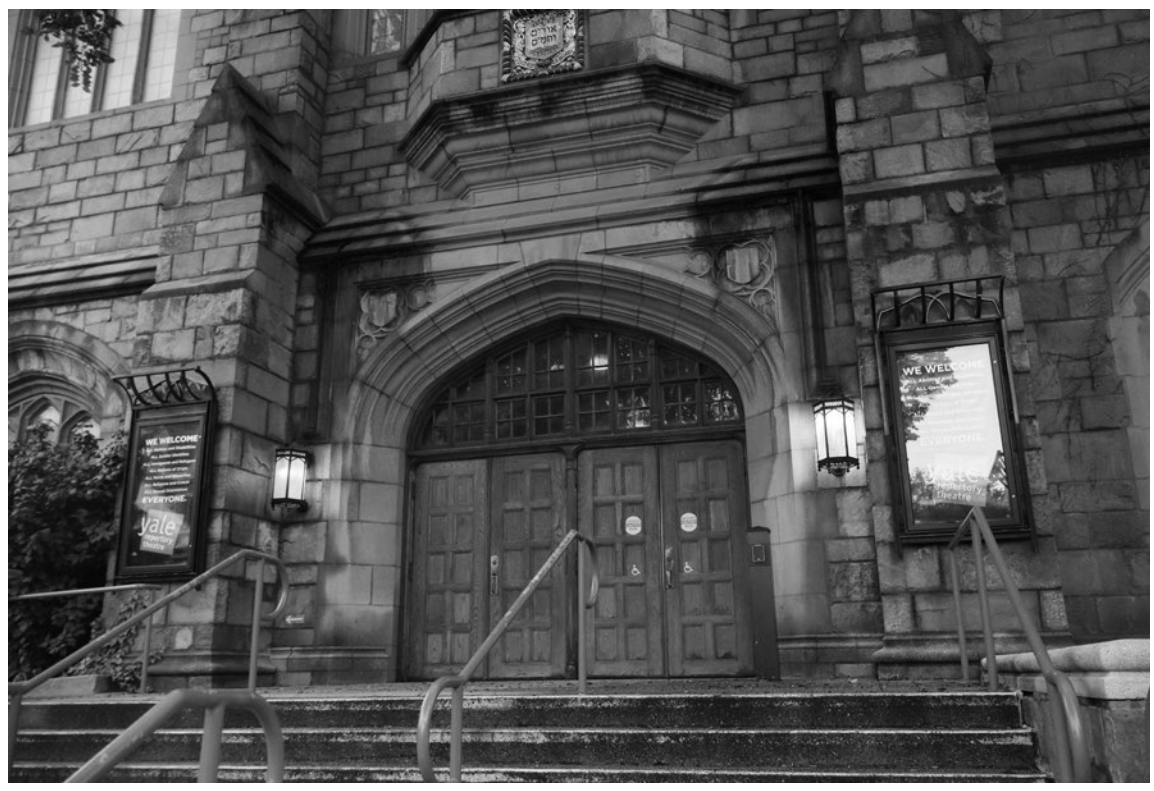
Wilson punctuates his play with refrains of "up there" and "down here;" his characters seem to constantly affirm their positions in the disparate space of the studio, itself a microcosm of the racialized industry they work in.

The play's final space, the lobby of the recording studio, is less clearly defined. Its social dynamics begin to take shape when Ma Rainey, played by Maiesha McQueen, bursts in. Tagging along are her "girl," Dussie Mae, played by Brittany Antoinette Davis DRA '28, and her nephew, Sylvester, played by Mark Yarde DRA '27. Dussie Mae and Sylvester both express a desire to ascend to the booth: Dussie Mae dances slowly on the stairs before Ma yells at her to get down, and Sylvester peers upwards before sitting on the bottom step. In their portrayals, both actors show a yearning for the power of the booth and an understanding that it is unattainable.

Ma spends much of the play in the lobby, arguing with record executives and constantly threatening to abandon the session and go back down South. Other characters constantly mention that she gets her way and she is in charge, but her near-constant position in the limbo of the lobby's sole armchair suggests that her relationship to the record industry is more complicated than it may appear. For all her confidence, Ma is also acutely aware of the uneven power dynamic in the relationship between a Black female artist and her white production team.

McQueen navigates these registers deftly, committing fully to Ma's bravado and the frustration she experiences as an artist in an industry that does not respect her humanity. In the beginning of the second act, Ma describes the exploitative nature of the artist-record label relationship as a kind of rape: As soon as the label captures her voice and traps it inside one of their "fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials," the executives treat Ma as they would "some whore." Here, McQueen pauses before she delivers the line, "And they roll over and put their pants on." All confident until this point, McQueen suddenly shows a different side of Ma, rendered vulnerable and powerless by the exploitative record industry.

The band's quartet of actors also portray the nuanced



MARTÍN PERALTA / HEAD PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR
August Wilson's play, which first premiered at the Rep in 1982, uses physical distance to emphasize 1920s racial divides.

frustrations of their characters with the sensitivity of artists who have worked hard to understand the themes beneath Wilson's dialogue. Terence Archie plays Cutler, the trombonist and band leader who expresses a deep respect for Ma and encourages the other musicians to stay in their place. Ray Anthony Thomas is Slow Drag, a playful and warm bassist who constantly reminds his colleagues that they are there to record music. At the band's initial rehearsal, Slow Drag stands in for Ma, singing her part with a lovely gravelly voice, at one point twirling his bass around as he sings. Thomas shapes him into a deeply sensitive character who feels a deep connection to both his fellow musicians and the blues songs they play.

Dion Graham's Toledo emerges as the most earnest of the ensemble, though his fierce intellectualism sometimes alienates him from the group. He constantly lectures the others about race in America, and his complex analogies often fall on deaf ears. Graham's characterization of Toledo is so strong that as soon as he leans in to say, "Let me tell you something," the audience lets out a chuckle in anticipation of the long and confusing conversation to come. When an argument with the trumpeter Levee, played by Jimmie JJ Jeter, escalates beyond Toledo's control, he transforms from a confident teacher-type to a fragile man, shocked and afraid at the anger of his colleague.

In his portrayal of Levee, Jeter was the standout performance of Saturday afternoon's show. With arrogance bordering on hubris, Levee constantly talks about writing his own music and forming his own band. He argues with Cutler about the existence of God, insisting that he hopes to sell his soul to the devil and that "God hate n****s." His insolence and anger have origins in a traumatic family past, which Jeter reveals in a stunning performance of the monologue that closes the second act. Throughout his more vulnerable moments, Jeter never lets go of Levee's rage. Even as he retells the story of his mother's rape and father's lynching, anger remains central to his character. This anger builds to the climax of the play, when he stabs Toledo for stepping on his new shoe. Because Levee's rage at white antagonists, bubbling beneath the surface, finds no other release, he explodes in an attack on a fellow musician, a fellow Black man.

"Ma Rainey's" is, in many ways, a play about frustrations. Its characters are divided, their relationships often antagonistic and miscommunicative. It is only when music plays that they seem to be able to overcome their differences: Ma and Sylvester perform from mics in the bandroom and on the steps above it, and Levee dances around the staircase headed to the lobby. McQueen's singing voice, rich and assured but also soaring and full of joy, provides a respite from the tense dynamics of the play, and the expertly engineered blend of pre-recorded instrumentals and live singing invites the audience into a real musical experience.

When the room fills with Ma's music, there is a sense that all of the pain and fighting that have happened during this session might be worth it, if only this feeling might be preserved in recorded sound. Of course, the audience's enjoyment of Ma's music also implicates them in the exploitative record industry, and theatergoers are left wondering if there exists any form of American art truly separated from the country's social turmoil.

Performances of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" will run at the University Theatre, located at 222 York St., until Oct. 24.

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REVIEW

This Fair Haven exhibit rebuilds the modern world in unfamiliar modes

BY ELLIE KOO
STAFF CRITIC

"Between Worlds," the Ely Center of Contemporary Art's newest exhibition, lives up to its name.

The show, which opened on Sept. 27, confronts the omnipresent challenge of making sense of our modern world that is shaped by both forces within our control and beyond our reach. Traversing the boundaries between form and content, 25 artists work explore the significance of the spaces we inhabit and move within, both physically and spiritually.



ELLIE KOO / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Although limited by the Ely Center's temporary space, "Between Worlds," which opened on Sept. 27, showcases the potential of the center to construct original yet perennial contemporary exhibits.

At first glance, the exhibition has a somewhat disconcerting effect. The Ely Center's temporary space at 162 James St. presents a few challenges in the presentation of the artwork, most notably the near fluorescent green walls against which many of the works are displayed. Though distinct from the neutral palettes of most gallery spaces, the green occasionally clashes with the works, distracting and detracting rather than enhancing the visual force of the art.

The exhibition's spatial orientation presents another challenge. In the second half of the show, dividing walls separate many of the works, limiting opportunities for the works to speak to one another. A more open layout may have encouraged not just interaction between viewer and individual artwork but also connections that emerge among the pieces themselves.

That said, individual works throughout the exhibition possess distinctive clarity and veracity. One of the first works encountered in the show, Komal Bakshi's "The Rigging," infuses modern vibrancy with a sense of nostalgia and fantasy. Painted on linen that hangs from the wall like a tapestry, the work evokes a distinctive sense of craftsmanship, further accentuated by ribbons glued onto the surface. Glitter lends the composition a shimmer that feels both ephemeral and whimsical but also bursting with energy.

Despite these varied materials, the work maintains a rhythm, an ebb and flow that draws the eye across its surface. Two girls, mirroring each other, lie on their sides in a grassy enclave, heads turned towards the viewer with unreadable expressions that suggest judgement, confusion and everything in between. Subtle discrepancies destabilize the otherwise symmetrical composition. The girl on the left holds three cards coyishly as a black cat reaches its paw toward her, and a picket fence hazily appears on only one edge of the scene. Within this seemingly pastoral, domestic setting, an eerie tension emerges as the viewer tries to decipher what belongs to reality and what to fantasy.

A similar act of world-building emerges in more traditionally painted works as well. Tabitha Whitley's oil painting "Path side" blurs the metaphysical boundaries of time and space. Its composition recalls Manet's famous and controversial salon painting "Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe," with similarities in how two figures sit together on a blanket, the left one making eye contact with the viewer while the right one turns away.

Yet any sense of compositional familiarity quickly dissolves. The garden surrounding the figures erupts in a fiery red, while a glassy, liquid-blue surface stretches diagonally across the lower left corner of the canvas. The woman wears combat boots; the man's fingernails are painted a bright orange. Whitley takes elements of a contemporary visual sensibility — details we might ordinarily recognize and readily interpret — and amplifies them to a disquieting degree. Such disparate motifs and surfaces destabilize the viewer's perception, conjuring an alternate universe that feels familiar yet entirely unreal.

Other works, including Alexander Edward's "Twitter Is the Copper Line of the Internet," disrupt our understanding of the material world. In this sculpture installation, three glass containers stand side by side. The left contains cases of canned SPAM meat, the middle is stuffed full of cotton balls and the right holds stacks and stacks of cookies. Pennies, both rusted and shiny, line the boxes' edges. The installation feels absurd, baffling and genuine. In presenting objects encountered in everyday life within a sculptural context, Edwards transforms our perception of their significance and also the temporal longevity of these items. Stripped of their utilitarian functions, the objects command attention simply through their tangible, material presence. In doing so, Edwards probes us to reconsider commodity, materialism and the dizzying pace of modern life.

There is much to appreciate in "Between Worlds,"from the driving creativity that animates the exhibition to the curatorial vision that brings its disparate works together. Despite the limitations of its physical space, the show offers moments of authentic disruptions of our mediated world and the strong currents of crossing over familiar and fantastical boundaries. With the exhibit, the Ely Center demonstrates a commitment to thoughtful, contemporary programming, in a way that suggests the center's commitment will continue to yield compellingly fresh exhibitions.

"Between Worlds" will be on view through Dec. 6.

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