

## WHY THEATRE?

At Center Theatre Group, we believe theatre creates an extraordinary connection between artists and audiences that only starts on our stages. Theatre creates the energy that feeds a city, a culture, and a society. Theatre reflects the community it serves.

# You are part of our community.

Center Theatre Group is excited to share the power of live theatre with you. It is an art form that embodies all of the arts: performance, visual, creative movement, writing, music, video, and technology. Theatre weaves all of the arts together to tell stories about what it means to be a human being.

## The Audience

Without you we wouldn't be here. So even if it's your first time sitting in the house, you are already the most important person in the room. Theatre is live. You see us, and we see you. So, laugh, think, and applaud. Everything is happening right in front of you!

“I found the theatre & I found my home.”

—Audra McDonald

Written by Khanisha Foster

### Special Thanks

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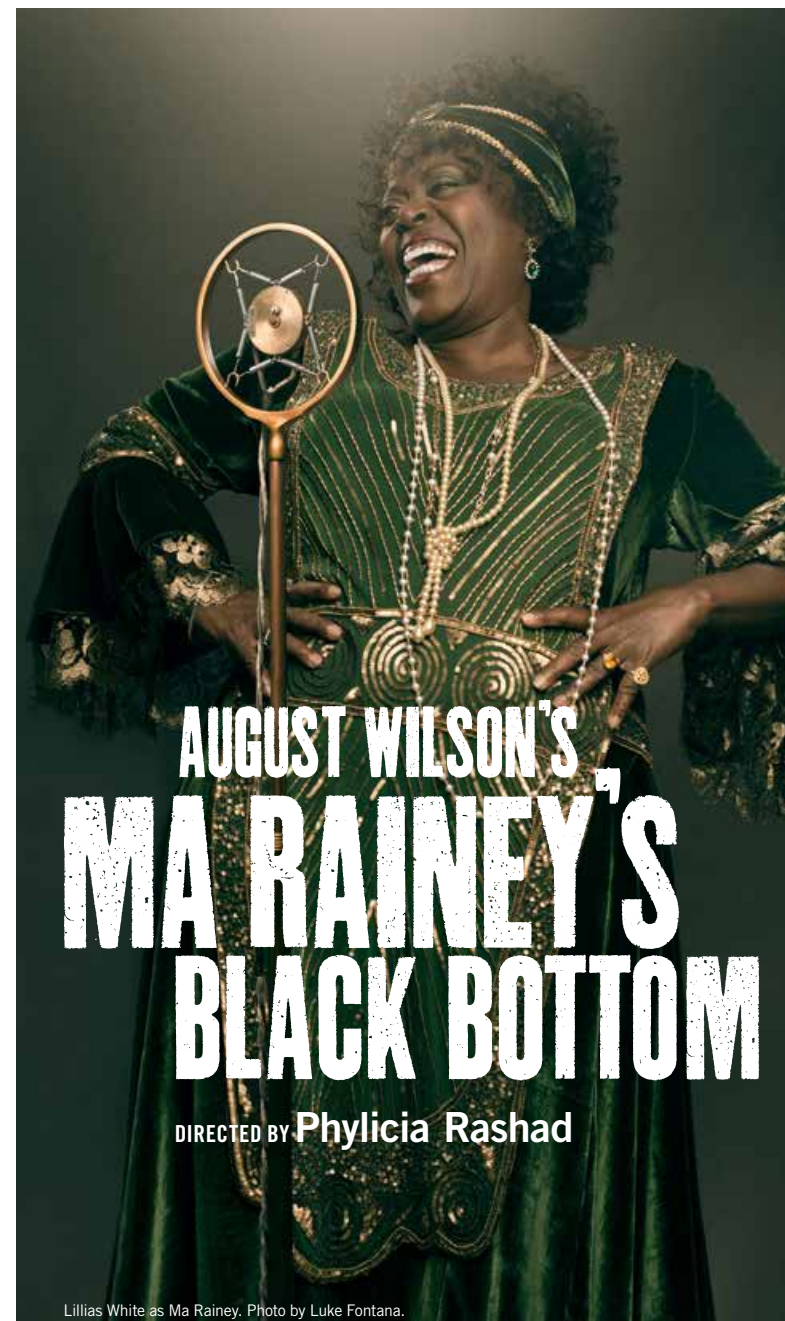
WELLS FARGO

The Student Matinee Program also receives generous support from Renee & Meyer Luskin, Deena & Edward Nahmias, Laura & James Rosenwald & Orinoco Foundation, Eva & Marc Stern, and the Artists & Educators Forum.

CenterTheatreGroup.org | 213.628.2772 | @CTGLA



# Discovery Guide



### exploitation

1. the action of **benefiting unfairly** from the **work of someone**, typically from being **overworked** or **underpaid**.
2. the action of making use of and benefiting from a situation or person in an unfair or selfish way.

CHICAGO

Welcome to Center Theatre Group's production of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, directed by Tony Award® winner Phylicia Rashad.

In the story, we see what happens when ambition and art collide with the business of the blues. An American masterpiece, August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is set in 1927 Chicago during a recording session at a white-owned studio. Inspired by and filled with the music that made the '20s roar, the play explores the many purposes of creative expression and the *exploitation* of African-American artists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

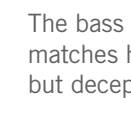


## MEET THE BAND



CUTLER

On guitar and trombone, Cutler is the leader of Ma Rainey's backing band and the most sensible member. He is described by Wilson as solid and unembellished like his music.



The bass player, whose rhythm matches his name, is bored by life but deceptively intelligent.



SLOW DRAG



TOLEDO

On piano, he is a serious man who speaks of racial pride and self-determination.



LEVEE



MA RAINEY

Singer Ma Rainey is outspoken, demanding, and well aware that she will be tolerated only as long as her records make money for her white producers. Notice in the play how she is able to hold her power.

Photos by Luke Fontana.



Photo by David Cooper.

## August Wilson, Playwright

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson (April 27, 1945 – October 2, 2005) is one of the most influential writers in American theatre. He is best known for *The American Century Cycle*, 10 plays that chronicle the African-American experience during each decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Wilson was named after his father, Frederick August Kittel—a German immigrant who was largely absent from his family’s life. His mother, Daisy Wilson Kittel, was left to raise six children on her own in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where many of Wilson’s plays were set. Wilson was biracial, but his cultural identity was firmly African-American.

When Wilson was a teenager, his mother remarried and the family moved to a predominantly white working-class neighborhood where they faced much racial hostility. Wilson attended several different high schools, but threats and abuse

drove him away. In the 10<sup>th</sup> grade, Wilson dropped out altogether after a history teacher, a black man he admired, accused him of plagiarizing an essay and gave him a failing grade. By the age of 15, Wilson chose the path of self-education, spending his days at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.

After his father died in 1965, Frederick August Kittel, Jr. officially changed his name to August Wilson in honor of his mother. That same year, he purchased his first typewriter and began to write poetry.

Wilson’s series of plays made him one of America’s most celebrated dramatists and earned him numerous awards. In 2005, the Virginia Theatre on Broadway in New York was renamed the August Wilson Theatre, and in 2006, the African American Cultural Center of Greater Pittsburgh was renamed the August Wilson Center for African American Culture.

## Phylicia Rashad, Director

Phylicia Rashad is an American actress and stage director who previously directed *Immediate Family* at the Taper, *A Raisin in the Sun* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, and Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* at the Taper. She also acted in Wilson’s *Gem of the Ocean* at the Taper and on Broadway in 2003 and 2004. She has appeared in many movies (most recently *Creed*) and on television (*Empire*, *The Cosby Show*).

Rashad recently told the *Los Angeles Times* why she loves directing Wilson’s work:

“He writes about specific time, specific people and specific circumstances,” Rashad said. “And because he is a humanist, there is a universality in all of his writings.”

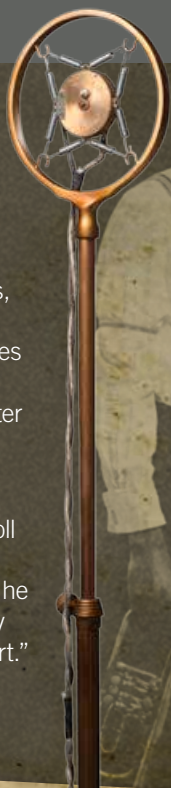


Photo by Luke Fontana.

## THE BLUES

The blues is a musical form that can be traced back to African rhythms, African-American slave songs, spirituals, and dance tunes known as “jump-ups.” Blues songs are songs of struggle and despair. For Wilson, the philosophies in the music teach his characters how to live their lives. As you watch the play, pay attention to how each character is written in the rhythm of their instrument.

Wilson first heard the blues in 1965. Bessie Smith’s recording of “Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine” resonated deeply: it “spoke to something in myself. It said, this is yours.” The blues showed him that he had a song worth singing, that his life and his community “were worthy of the highest celebration and occasion of art.”



What music defines you?

What instrument best represents your rhythm?

## WORTH & POWER

Most African-American performers in the 1920s—and indeed, for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century—were exploited by white record labels, producers, and even artists who profited thanks to their talent and creativity. Ma Rainey was known as a shrewd businesswoman. At the height of her popularity in the 1920s she was making \$2,000 a week—that would be about \$25,000 today. What did she have to do to earn what she felt she was worth? What about the artists who weren’t able to succeed in getting paid fairly for their work? Wilson explores how this exploitation left many feeling robbed of their voice and worth.



Gertrude Priddett “Ma” Rainey

In the following scene, the band members are in a heated discussion about their race and their worth.

**TOLEDO:** You lucky they let you be an entertainer. They ain’t got to accept your way of entertaining. You lucky and don’t even know it. You’s entertaining and the rest of the people is hauling wood. That’s the only kind of job for the colored man.

**SLOW DRAG:** Ain’t nothing wrong with hauling wood. I done hauled plenty wood. My daddy used to haul wood. Ain’t nothing wrong with that. That’s honest work.

**LEVEE:** That ain’t what I’m talking about. I ain’t talking about hauling no wood. I’m talking about being satisfied with a bone somebody throwed you...

**TOLDEDO:** We done sold Africa for the price of tomatoes. We done sold ourselves to the white man in order to be like him. Look at the way you dressed... That ain’t African. That’s the white man. We trying to be just like him. We done sold who we are in order to become someone else. We’s imitation white men.

**CUTLER:** What else we gonna be, living over here?

**LEVEE:** I’m Levee. Just me. I ain’t no imitation nothing!

**SLOW DRAG:** You can’t change who you are by how you dress. That’s what I got to say.

**TOLEDO:** It ain’t all how you dress. It’s how you act, how you see the world. It’s how you follow life.

Have you ever felt like you had to change a part of yourself to be successful or to be accepted?

How do you measure your worth and the worth of others?

## WELCOME TO THE THEATRE!

Founded in 1967, Center Theatre Group, a nonprofit organization, is one of the largest and most active theatre companies in the nation, programming shows year-round at the Ahmanson Theatre and Mark Taper Forum in Downtown Los Angeles, as well as the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Downtown Culver City.

### WHERE will you be going the day of the show?

August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* will be performed in the Mark Taper Forum. Every seat is a fantastic seat at the Taper. Built with the sound quality and intimacy of ancient Greek theatres, even the back of the 736-seat house makes you feel like a part of the show.

### WHO will you meet and whose work will you see?

Theatre is a collaborative art form; it’s a team sport.

- **The creative team:** playwright, director, actors, designers (for the stage, sets, lights, costumes), musicians
- **The crew:** stage manager, crew members (who run the lights and sound and move the set pieces), dressers/costumers, make-up artists
- **The house:** house manager, ushers, maintenance staff
- **Theatre company:** producers, educators, administrative staff

### WHAT will happen once you arrive at the Mark Taper Forum?

When you arrive at the venue, you will be greeted by Center Theatre Group staff.

Once you’re inside and seated, you’ll receive a brief introduction to the event before the house lights dim and the show begins.

After the show, you will have the opportunity to discuss what excited and resonated with you about the play.

