

WELCOME

Center Theatre Group is excited to bring you access to our archival performance of the Los Angeles revival of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* by August Wilson, presented live at the Mark Taper Forum.

We believe a great play raises questions about the human condition, and a great educational experience allows students an opportunity to reflect upon those questions and begin to discover their own answers.

We have designed these activities and the companion videos to help you prepare your students to see the play and to follow up the performance with options for discussion, reflection, and creativity. During the videos, you can have your students follow the Teaching Artists and just pause the video when needed.

PRE-SHOW GOALS

Introduce the play, playwright and themes of play.

Build curiosity about some of the big ideas in this play.

Provide information about the story, style and Inspiration for the piece.

Activities (pages 2-14)

01—Introduction and Overview (9:00)

02—Talking Smack (3:46)

03—Great Game of Power (9:51)

04—What Do You See? 1-10 (13:47)

05—Status (22:17)

06—Playlist with A Purpose (2:17)

POST-SHOW GOALS

Reflect on the art. What is staying with you?

Examine how this play connects to our lives and world.

Artistically explore ideas from the play.

Activities (pages 15-26)

07—Reflection Questions (2:48)

08—Four Corners (5:04)

09—Word Wizard (12:06)

10—Generational Differences (1:51)

11—Exploitation Poem (6:04)

12—Blues Song (31:31)

13—Stew (3:09)

INTRODUCTION TO AUGUST WILSON AND THE AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE

Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright August Wilson is one of the most influential writers in American theatre. He is best known for the Century Cycle. In 10 plays— each set in a different decade of the 20th century— August Wilson captured the daily lives and challenges of African Americans one decade at a time. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*—set in 1927—is the third play in the cycle.

Wilson is quoted as saying *“I am not a historian. I happen to think that the content of my mother's life - her myths, her superstitions, her prayers, the contents of her pantry, the smell of her kitchen, the song that escaped from her sometimes parched lips, her thoughtful repose and pregnant laughter - are all worthy of art.”* With these words he lets us all know that we are the expert of our experiences and our experience is worthy of being shared.

A writer himself, Wilson was influenced heavily by different arts forms. His influences are known as the four B's. They are the writing of Amiri **Baraka**, the artwork of Romare **Bearden**, the music of the **Blues**, and writer Jorge Luis **Borges**.

INTRODUCTION TO THE PLAY

Set in a Chicago recording studio in 1927, August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place over the course of an afternoon, as a group of musicians and the legendary blues singer Ma Rainey record a new album. We meet the musicians: Toledo, Levee, Cutler and Slow Drag as they wait for Ma Rainey to arrive for the recording session. The men tell stories and jokes, philosophize and argue, each musician bringing a different perspective to Black life in America. Inspired by and filled with music of the 1920s, the play explores creative expression, power dynamics and the exploitation of African American artists in the music industry. August Wilson's plays are always influenced and informed by music. *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes it one step further, making the Blues both the subject and the style of the story.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The 1920s was a period in which most Black people in the United States were born as free people—the first generation of African Americans not born into slavery. In 1927, The Great Migration was underway, and African Americans were migrating from the rural South to the urban North in search of equality and opportunity.



It was also the Jazz Age, and many young people were flocking to nightclubs and speakeasies to drink and dance to music by rising stars such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong.



The Harlem Renaissance, a golden age of Black intellectual and artistic expression, was in full swing. This prolific cultural movement extended across American cities and created a new sense of Black cultural identity and pride.



However, despite their significant social advancements, African Americans were still treated as second-class citizens. In Chicago, nativism and racism manifested itself in unofficial segregation, discrimination, and violence. Racial tensions ran high between African American newcomers and established white communities.



The prosperity and the progress; the inequity and the corruption—all this sets the backdrop for Ma Rainey’s Chicago of the “Roaring” 1920s.

MA RAINEY, THE MOTHER OF THE BLUES

Ma Rainey was born Gertrude Pridgett in Columbus, Georgia on April 26, 1886, and left home as a teenager to perform on the Black minstrel troupe circuit around the American South. Rainey was among the first popular entertainers to include authentic blues in her minstrel and vaudeville repertoire. She was discovered by a Paramount Records producer in 1923 and quickly became a sensation. She was one of the first Black women to become a professional blues singer, as well as one of the first blues vocalists whose voice was immortalized in recordings.

During her heyday, Ma Rainey went by many names. The Songbird of the South. The Gold-Neck Woman of the Blues. The Paramount Wildcat. But Rainey is probably best remembered as the "Mother of the Blues."

At the height of her popularity in the 1920s (when Blues was entering the American mainstream), she performed in jazz venues throughout the United States with famous musicians including [Louis Armstrong](#) and [Sidney Bechet](#). Between 1923 and 1928 alone, she made more than 100 recordings, including "Bo-Weevil Blues," "See See Rider Blues," and "Black Bottom," from which Wilson's play takes its name.

She is remembered for her flamboyant costumes, her elaborate stage shows and her powerful and raw singing voice. Unlike many popular musicians of her day, her songs dealt with dark issues including abandonment, alcohol abuse and murder. She is known for frank and evocative lyrics, which didn't shy away from expressing her sexuality—she was openly bisexual—or her Southern upbringing.

Rainey passed away in 1939 and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1990 cementing her legacy as one of the founding matriarchs of the Blues genre and paving the way for the countless Blues, Soul, and R&B singers who followed. Rainey's childhood home in Columbus, Georgia was recently restored and converted into [the Ma Rainey House and Blues Museum](#) and is now free and open to the public.



<https://www.atlasobscura.com/articles/the-queer-black-woman-who-reinvented-the-blues>
<https://libguides.usc.edu/c.php?g=571084&p=3936619>

BACKGROUND ON BLUES

In terms of music history, the 1920s marked the beginning of the modern music era. At the time, there were three main ways of listening to music: at a live concert, on the radio, or with a record player. The 1920s is commonly known as the Jazz Age. However, the characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* gather to record another American music genre: The Blues.

Rooted in vocal traditions brought to America by African slaves, the Blues was born in the American South (in the Mississippi Delta). It is an African American musical innovation commonly recognized by its call and response, lyric structure, melancholy sound, distinctive “blue notes, and characteristic chord progressions.

At the time our story takes place, the Blues was played almost exclusively by Black musicians, and resulting “race records” were marketed and sold specifically to Black communities. Soon, new, improvisational jazz styles would replace the Blues as the greatest influence on popular dance music. In the American music industry, the Blues was on its way out as its brother jazz was on its way in.

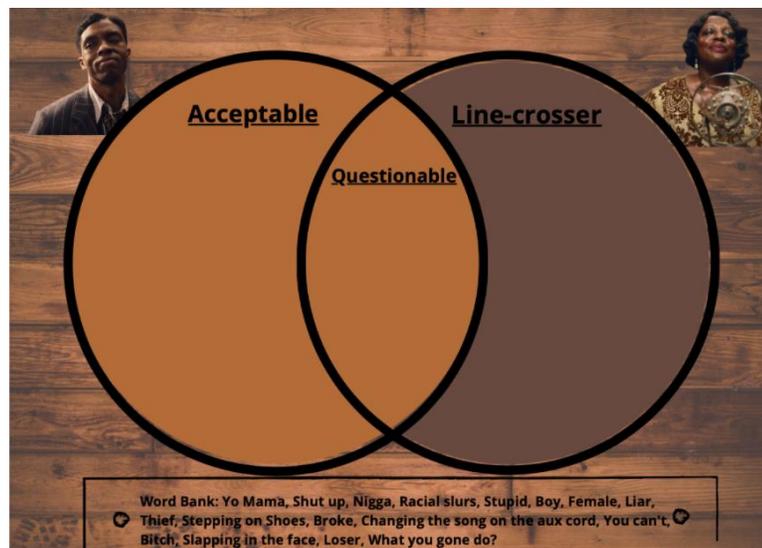
For more about the Blues’ origins and its lasting influence on modern musical styles:

- <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/travel/discover-america/evolution-of-music/>
- http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/bhistory/history_of_jazz.htm
- <https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200197451>

TALKING SMACK

In the play, the musicians do a lot of talking smack to each other. At times, this conversation back and forth can teeter on the lines of joking, bullying, and flat out hurtful. This is something that happens in every school across the country. Some words, or actions can be more offensive than others. Some words or actions depend on the relationships of the people. Some are typically okay; others are always offensive. But there is a gray area where some of these words and actions live.

Note to Educators: Use the graphic below by clicking on the link to make your own copy. You may put students in breakout rooms and have each group place the words from the word bank in one of the circles. The students should be given 5-7 minutes to do this. Upon returning from the breakout rooms, groups should share why they placed the words where they did.



https://jamboard.google.com/d/1pjcbxHK9JdMFoF8udminqiQ5nzKqLX_AEySDCb4RyKw/copy?f=0

In the play, a word you will hear a lot is the N-Word. It is a word that has the flexibility to fall anywhere on the spectrum between a term of endearment all the way to being a weapon to spew hatred based on who is saying it and the circumstances surrounded when it is said. In the show, you will hear it used in many different ways. What can be difficult about the N-Word is that it comes with a set of nuances without any hard and fast rules. It is flexible, not static.

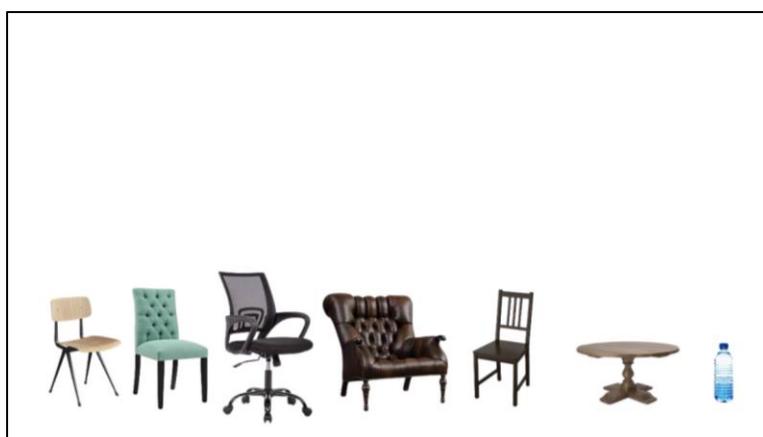
Growing up, it was a word I heard from everyone around me, from Pastors down the line to my friends in elementary school. Even from teachers and athletes. It was somewhat of an open secret in my community. Almost everyone I knew who was Black said it, they just didn't say it in professional settings or around White people. The N-word, for better or for worse, is part of the Black community and culture. It is tailored into the fabric of who we are; in our literature, in our music, in our lives, and in the words of Suzan Lori Park, "in our drinking water."

GREAT GAME OF POWER

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, we see power play out in multiple ways. Based on several factors such as status, skill, and physical appearance, we see power utilized and levied against all the characters we meet in the play.

This is an activity that comes from renowned theater practitioner Augusto Boal and it explores representations of power through the construction of a visual image made of everyday objects. This strategy explores the relationship between observation and interpretation through the use of the DAR (Describe, Analyze, Relate) meaning-making routine.

Note to Educators: Use the graphic below by clicking on the link to make your own copy.



https://jamboard.google.com/d/1po7iaWKW14X5iiZGT9Ci_hS9NCDvgFjobOyLLnVeImY/copy?f=0

You will see five chairs, a coffee table and a water bottle placed in a row. Ask for a volunteer to silently arrange the objects in such a way that, in their opinion, one item has more power than all the others. Explain that any of the objects can be moved in any direction or placed on top of each other, but none of the objects can be removed altogether from the space.

Once the chairs have been arranged, ask that volunteer to not reveal his/her thinking behind the arrangement. Ask the group to interpret or “read” the image made by the chairs and water bottle. Encourage a number of different interpretations, then have another volunteer repeat the activity.

- **Describe:** What do you see? Describe the way the chairs are positioned.
- **Analyze:** What does that position represent or make you think of? Why do you say that? What is another interpretation of this position? Which chair has the most power? Why?
- **Relate** (Make connections to content): Does this image represent a moment in history/a scene from our book/an interaction at our school... what does this image represent? Why? What else could it be?

Side Coaching

Remember you can arrange the chairs in any position you wish.

How is the water bottle positioned in the image? Consider what it represents.

Reflection

What are some of the different ways we saw power represented in this activity?

What makes someone or something powerful?

Who or what is powerful in our world now/was powerful then? Why?

While you watch *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, look for the stage pictures that director Phylicia Rashad has created that tell you about who has power at any given moment.

WHAT DO YOU SEE? 1-10

Objectives

- Explore the many stories in a picture.
- Create tableaux on the theme of power.
- Combine tableaux and text from the play to explore power dynamics.
- Reflect on the stage pictures created in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Activity

I'm going to create a frozen picture or tableaux with my body. I want you to look at the frozen image and ask yourself "What do I see?" What is a story in this picture? I'm not looking for one right image but rather how many stories we can discover. Turn off cameras and unmute yourself.

Demo: What do you see? Participants call out verbally what they see.

I'd like a volunteer to strike a new frozen pose. Don't try to tell a specific story - just make a shape with your body. It's the audience's job to see how many stories we can see in the picture. Give volunteers a "1, 2, 3 Frozen Picture" to start. Ask participants: What do you see?

We are going to continue communicating through tableaux and do a variation called 1-10. This time rather than SAYING what we see, we will SHOW it.

- **A** creates a pose and says 1.
- **B** looks at A's image, thinks "what do I see" and responds physically, saying 2.
- **A** unfreezes and looks at B's pose, thinks "what do I see", responds physically, saying 3....
- Do this all the way to 10.
- Ask participants what they observed in the poses: What did they see?

Note to Educators: Put the participants into pairs in breakout rooms and have them do the 1-10 activity. Or have volunteer pairs take turns doing 1-10 images for the whole group.

The theme of Power

Power plays a big role in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Different characters have power depending on the situation at different moments in the play. The dictionary definition of power is "The ability to do or act; the possession of control or command over others."

Demonstrate doing 1-10 exploring different types of power relationships in the poses.

- **A** creates a pose and says 1.
- **B** responds physically to the image with a pose that creates any type of power relationship between the two statues and then says 2.
- **A** unfreezes and responds physically to the image with a pose that creates any type of power relationship between the two statues and says 3.
- Go to 10.

Note to Educators: *Pause the camera here and have the participants do 1-10 with the theme of power—in breakout rooms or as a whole group. Ask participants what type of power poses they observed.*

1 -10 with TEXT

The final part of this activity is to add text from *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* to our 1-10 power poses. You will continue to respond physically to your partners' pose but instead of the numbers you will say the following dialogue:

- **A** creates a pose and says, "You Play What I say."
- **B** responds physically to the image with a pose that creates any type of power relationship between the two statues and then says, "I play what I feel."
- **A** unfreezes and responds physically to the image with a pose that creates any type of power relationship between the two statues and then says, "You play what I say."

Note to Educators: *Pause the camera here and have the participants do 1-10 with the theme of power—in breakout rooms or as a whole group. Ask participants what type of power poses and line readings they observed.*

While you watch *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* look for the stage pictures that director Phylicia Rashad has created that tell you about who has power at any given moment. Listen for dialogue that explores power. Who has power at different moments in the play? How do you know?

STATUS

Objectives

- Provide students background information of the hierarchy of the music industry in the 1920s.
- Enable students to experience how status changes according to given circumstances.

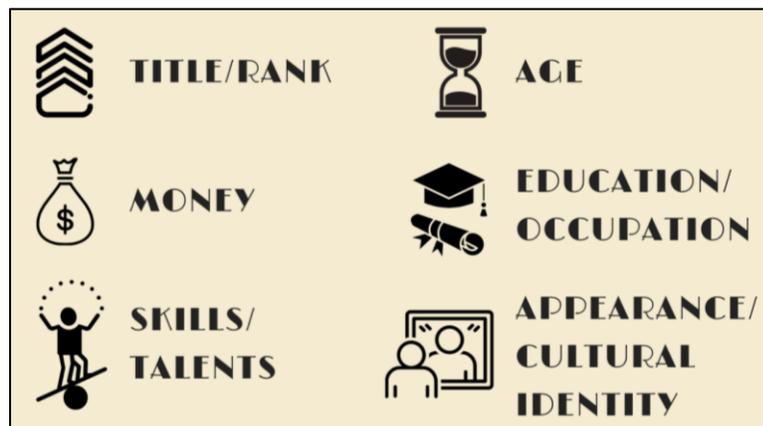
Activity

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom offers audiences a glimpse into the world of Chicago's vibrant music industry. Early 1927 was a time that preceded cassettes, compact discs, mp3s, and digital streaming. The recording industry was amidst its adolescence. Sounds were scratched into vinyl records and listened to on record players. The music business had shifted from song publishers to major and indie record labels that signed individual artists. Songwriters and publishers were guaranteed royalties, but performers were often still paid flat fees for their recordings. A clear business hierarchy was in place.

In the play, there are three basic settings: the recording studio, the rehearsal room, and the city outside. Depending on who is doing what and where, the characters' status change throughout the play.

So, what is status? For the purposes of our activity, we'll define status as a relative difference in **power** (dynamics).

Depending on how much time you have, you may choose to expand the conversation and ask students to offer specific examples. Here are a few status factors and questions you can use to help get the conversation started:



- Title/Rank: In businesses, institutions, and organizations, what is the hierarchy?
- Age: When is it advantageous to be young/old?
- Money: What are status symbols of material wealth?
- Education/Occupation: What degrees/professions are considered prestigious?
- Skills/Talents: Who is someone exceptional whose skills/talents you admire?
- Appearance/Cultural Identity (Race/Ethnicity/Sexuality/Religion/Gender): What is considered desirable or acceptable?

Status Role Play

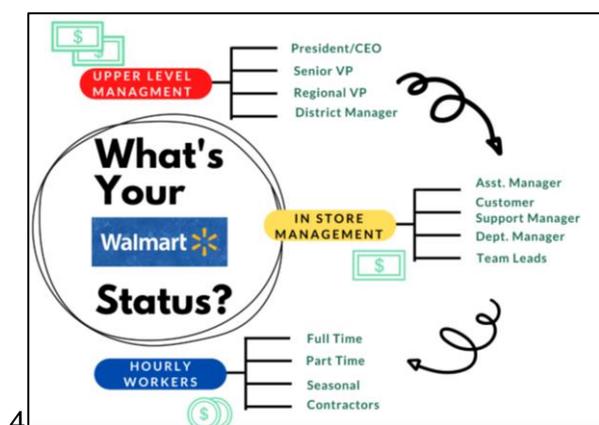
Now that we have a better understanding of status, let's try some role play.

Round 1: In breakout groups, or as one large class with observers, imagine you are all employees at Walmart. [Roll the die](#) to discover where you land in this hierarchy:

1-2 = Upper-Level Management

3-4 = In-Store Management

5-6 = Hourly Workers



Give yourself a name and a job title (rewrite your nametag). Now, imagine that you are all at a company holiday party. Engage in conversation with your co-workers/your staff. How do you interact with each person? How do you say hello? What do you talk about? What do you want from them? (Make sure you have at least one interaction with one other person.)

Reflection

Who had higher status than you? Who had lower status? How did your behavior and relationships change based on your relative status?

Round 2:

Note to Educators: In advance of this activity, you'll need to assign each student in each breakout group a specific character from the character list. Students should not know what other students' character assignments are. Those should remain secret. If you have groups larger than 6, feel free to incorporate additional characters from the play.

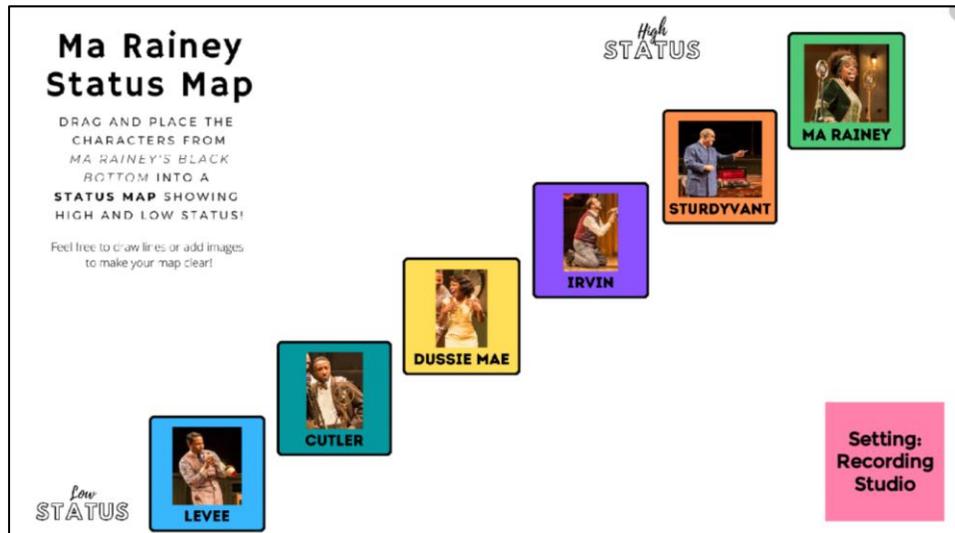
Now that roles have been assigned, let's meet some of the characters from the play.

 <p>MA RAINY Recording Artist. The "Mother of the Blues". A self-assured, self-aware force of nature.</p>	 <p>DUSSIE MAE Ma's girlfriend. A nonmusical observer. Attractive and provocative.</p>
 <p>STURDYVANT Record Producer. Owns the recording studio. Insensitive and concerned mainly with profit.</p>	 <p>CUTLER Band leader. Cautious, practical, unoriginal. Tries to keep the band on task.</p>
 <p>IRVIN Manager. Claims to know "how to handle" Ma. Tries to appease both Sturdyvant and Ma Rainey.</p>	 <p>LEVEE Youngest band member. Not well-educated but ambitious. Dreams of forming his own band.</p>

In this round of role play, you will explore how your assigned character behaves in different scenarios. (You will work in the same breakout group and continue role-playing the same character throughout.)

Exploration A: Recording Studio while Recording a Song

Take a look at this status map. Notice the setting. For this first round, your relative status has been determined for you. Look for your character to see where they land. Take a few minutes to role play what might be going on in the recording studio while recording a song.



<https://jamboard.google.com/d/1S6jlvb-mPv8g6At1mWGHAvwRbeOmSnCJs-v2usjD41l/copy>

Exploration B: Rehearsal Room Before Recording Session

Now that you've gotten more familiar with your characters, let's change the setting. Take a few minutes to role play what might be going on in the rehearsal room before the recording session. This time, you need to decide what you think your relative status is. This determination may be based on how others see/treat you. Once you finish your role play, complete the Status Map based on what you discovered as a group.

Exploration C: City Streets

On the streets of downtown Chicago, 1927. Repeat as described above. Once you finish your role play, complete the Status Map based on what you discovered as a group.

Note to Educators: Other possible scenarios for additional explorations include a meeting with recording studio executives, at a live show in a nightclub, or in a hotel room while on tour.

Reflection

What was your character's status relative to the other characters? How did that affect your behavior? Did your character's status change in each scenario? If so, how?

When you watch the show, observe how each character interacts with the other characters, think about who has high and low status, and notice how and why the characters' statuses change from scene to scene. Thanks for participating.

PLAYLIST WITH A PURPOSE

Objectives

- Reflect on the purpose and power of music.
- Explore the role of music in our own lives.
- Make connections between music in their own lives and what music means to the characters in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Activity

This is adapted from an activity from the Grammy Museum's Education Department. It is designed to get participants thinking about the purpose of music and the different roles music plays in their lives.

In the introduction to *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, playwright August Wilson writes: "It is hard to define this music—suffice it to say that it is a music that breathes and touches. That connects. That is in itself a way of being, separate and distinct from any other. This music is called the Blues."

Create a personal playlist using the following categories:



Note to Educators: You can also have the class create a shared playlist focusing on one or just a few categories.

Before or after creating their playlist, have a discussion about the purpose and the power of music. Here are a few sample prompts:

- Why do humans need music in our lives?
- What role does music play in your life?
- What style of music best expresses your thoughts and feelings?
- Have you ever used music to communicate something you couldn't put into words?

While you watch the play, think about what music means in your life and notice what music means to each of the different characters we meet. How does playwright August Wilson use music to help tell this story?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Objectives

- Share thoughts and reflections to seeing *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.
- Explore how the production connects to your own life.

Note to Educators: Reflection questions can be used for whole or small group discussion or individual writing.

1. What's staying with you after seeing *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*? An image, a moment, a character, a feeling, a line from the play?
2. Because music was both a subject and the style of the play...
 - What did music mean to the different characters in the play?
 - What role does music play in your life?
 - What style of music best expresses your thoughts and feelings?
 - Have you ever used music to communicate something you couldn't put into words?
 - Why do humans need music in our lives?
3. What did you notice about POWER during the play? Who has the power at different points in the play, and how do they get it? What different types of power did you observe?
4. Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks said, "August Wilson helps us remember who we are...all of us, as. An American people." Do you agree/disagree? How do his plays help us remember who we are as Americans?

FOUR CORNERS

Materials Needed

Something to write on and something to write with.

Note to Educators: Feel free to have the questions stand alone or to add discussion questions after each one. Some questions you can ask are: What shocked you most about your answers? What did you feel when answering? Any answers you wish were different?

On a scrap piece of paper please write the number that correlates to the given options to each question below.

1. Who do you feel most safe around?
 - 1.1. Friends
 - 1.2. Family
 - 1.3. Strangers
 - 1.4. Alone

2. Who makes you the most upset?
 - 2.1. Enemies
 - 2.2. Friends
 - 2.3. Family
 - 2.4. Yourself

3. Who catches our anger the most?
 - 3.1. The person we're mad at
 - 3.2. Family
 - 3.3. Friends
 - 3.4. Yourself

In the play, you're going to see these different things play out time and time again, especially in the end with Levee kills Toledo. Levee is under immense pressure from every angle in his life and it seems the one person who catches his anger was one of the people nicest to him in the entire show. Think about that as you continue to lead questions around this subject and around *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

WORD WIZARD

Objectives

- Reflect on what they would speak up for and what they want to say about a specific person, quality or cause. What they value.
- Experience losing their voice, being silenced.
- Explore non-verbal ways to communicate.
- Reflect on who is voiceless in today's world. How can each individual help give voice to the voiceless?

Materials Needed

Something to write on and something to write with.

Activity

In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, we watched Ma use her words and her voice to stand up for herself. She stood up for Sylvester. She stood up for her music. You might remember hearing the character of Ma Rainey talk about voice. In the play she said: "They wanna take my voice and trap it in them fancy boxes with all them buttons and dials... They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice." Sha also said, "Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her. That's what counts with Ma."

In this activity, we are going to explore "words and voice." We will start with a personal reflection. You will be asked to share part of this reflection, but only a part.

- Breathe in/Breathe out.
- Think of something/someone that you value deeply: a person, a cause, your family or heritage, an idea (like freedom, creativity etc.)
- Why does this matter to you?
- What would you say to let people know how important or great this is (why it matters)?
- What would you say to protect this person or family or idea? What would you say to celebrate this?
- What would you say to educate people about why it matters?
- Imagine giving a speech and everyone in the audience learns how great and vital and wonderful this person, family, idea is.
- Breathe in/Breathe out.
- End reflection. Open eyes.

Write down 6 words of the many words that describe what you care about (words that you are comfortable sharing).

1. Stand up/ bring your paper and pen with you.... Cover the space. As you walk, think about the person, cause, idea etc. that matters to you. Freeze.

Note to Educators: Put the participants into breakout rooms in pairs. They will be in the breakout room for under a minute.

In the breakout room share your 6 words with your partner and they will share their 6 words with you. Thank your partner non-verbally.

2. Cover the space. As you walk, think about the person, cause, idea etc. that matters to you. Freeze. "I'm the Word Wizard and I am taking away 3 of your words. Cross out three on your list." How do you pick? How does it feel? You have three words left.

Note to Educators: Put the participants into breakout rooms in pairs. Again, they will be in the breakout room for under a minute.

In the breakout room share your 3 words with your partner and they share their 3 words with you. Thank your partner non-verbally.

3. Cover the space. As you walk, think about the person, cause, idea etc. that matters to you. Freeze. "I'm the Word Wizard and I am taking away 2 of your words. Cross out 2. How do you pick? How does it feel? You have one word left.

Note to Educators: Put the participants into breakout rooms in pairs. Again, they will be in the breakout room for under a minute.

In the breakout room share your 1 word with your partner and they share their 1 word with you. Thank your partner non-verbally.

4. Cover the space. As you walk, think about the person, cause, quality etc. that matters to you. Freeze. "I'm the Word Wizard. I am taking away your last word."
5. Cover the space. You have no words. What is the feeling? Freeze.

Whole group: Think about how important and wonderful that person/idea/cause is. But you have no words. Try to communicate those feelings non-verbally to someone on the screen. Close your eyes. Breathe.

6. I'm giving you back your 6 words. How does that feel?

Note to Educators: Put the participants into breakout rooms in pairs. Again, they will be in the breakout room for under a minute.

In the breakout room, share your 6 words with your partner and have them share their 6 words with you. This time as you share your words and your partner shares words, one or more of their words may resonate for you. Ask your partner's permission to share their word/words if one does. If they say yes, add it to your list. Your partner also keeps their original word. You both have it on your lists. You might have as many as 12 words now...

Note to Educators: You can repeat this round several times so that students may end up with 6-36 words.

Writing

You now have between 6 and 36 words. This is your vocabulary. You can use one word or as many of these words as you want to write a song, a letter, a poem, a protest poster, that communicates why your original person or cause or idea matters so much to you.

Note to Educators: Give students about 10 minutes to write, then ask for volunteers to share some of the writing.

Discuss

Here are some discussion/reflection prompts to close this activity:

- What was the feeling of losing your words/losing your voice?
- What did it feel like to get your words/voice back?
- How did this connect to the characters you met in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*?

I shared this quote at the beginning of the activity: "Ma listens to her heart. Ma listens to the voice inside her. That's what counts with Ma."

- How do you listen to the voice inside you?
- How does that help you to use your voice to stand up for what matters to you?

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Every generation passes down something to younger generations. In that same vein, every generation has something they do differently than the one before.

You just saw the show. It seemed like Levee was constantly clashing with others. What did they clash about? Do you think it was because they were different generations?

Levee and his bandmates clash on everything from his style of dress, to the music he likes, the way he wants to lead a band, and even something as deeply rooted as faith.

I want you to imagine you were someone in your life from a different generation. It could be a grandparent, a parent, an older neighbor, a teacher, or a coach.

Note to Educators: *For this exercise, you will need volunteers. Those volunteers would have to explore the differences they see from one generation to the next in the way they dress, the music they listen to, the options for profession to go into, and the faith they practice. This can be explored in discussion or by changing the zoom name to what differences you see in older generations, choosing from the options of: Dress, Music, Faith, and Profession.*

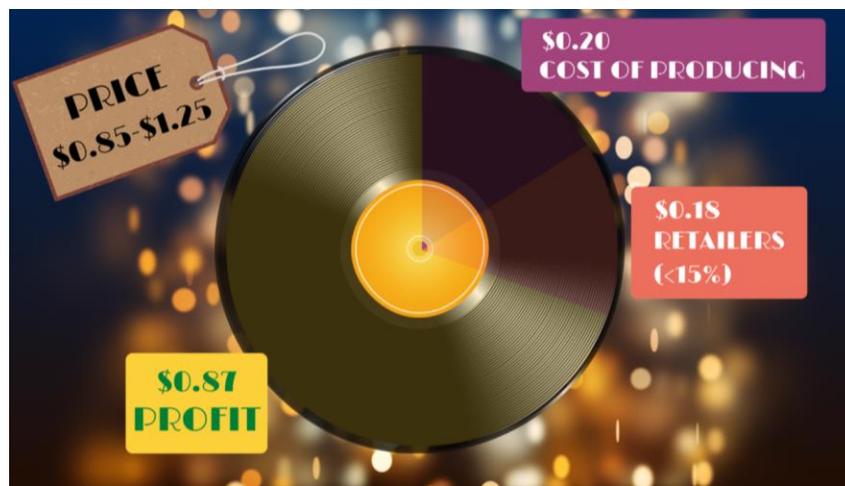
EXPLOITATION POEM

Materials Needed

Something to write on and something to write with.

In 1921, the typical cost of producing a record was about 20 cents, including payment to songwriters or performers. Retailers kept no more than 15%, and consumers typically paid between 85 cents and \$1.25 for a record. Most costs were recouped after 5000 copies were sold, with the rest being pure profit.

For more information on the record industry during the 1920s-1950s, check out this link: <https://medium.com/@Vinylmint/history-of-the-record-industry-1920-1950s-6d491d7cb606>)



Now that you've seen the show, you might imagine who pocketed those profits. In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, you may recall Ma pointing out, "If you colored and can make them some money, then you all right with them. Otherwise, you just a dog in the alley."

The play itself explores the historic exploitation of Black recording artists by white producers in 1920s Chicago.

Cambridge Dictionary defines "exploitation" as:

- the use of something in order to get an advantage from it
- the act of using someone unfairly for your own advantage
- the use or development of something for profit or progress in business
- unfair treatment of other people for your own advantage

Discussion

Do you think the music industry has changed the way it treats its artists of color? In what ways do people continue to exploit others for personal or commercial gain?

Note to Educators: You may choose to pause the video here to engage students in discussion.

Examples of exploitation:

- Labor
- Sexual
- Forced marriage
- Forced criminality
- Child soldiers
- Organ harvesting
- Economic exploitation (pharmaceuticals)

Personal Connection

Let's do a private quickwrite. Grab a piece of paper and something to write with. You do not have to share your answer with anyone unless you would like to.

When have you been in a situation in which you had the upper hand and used that to your advantage...at the cost of someone or something else?

Thank you for being honest and taking the time to write down some thoughts.

August Wilson said of the poet/activist/playwright Amiri Baraka, "From Amiri Baraka, I learned that all art is political..." If you recall the Four B's, you know that Wilson was greatly influenced by Baraka's political poetry and plays.

Acrostic Poem

Informed by our group discussion and the answers to your personal reflection, we'll now create our own political art in the form of an acrostic poem.

E	_____
X	_____
P	_____
L	_____
O	_____
I	_____
T	_____
A	_____
T	_____
I	_____
O	_____
N	_____

Final Reflection

Are there ways in which you (we) are complicit in the exploitation of others? What would it take to bring it to an end? What could you do?

BLUES SONG

Objectives

- Understand the basic structure of a Blues song.
- Collaborate and create a Blues song based on a current topic.

The Blues: What it is and Why and Line of Questioning

In 1903, African American orchestra leader W.C. Handy was supposedly waiting for a train in Mississippi when he heard a man wail out a song while plucking a street-made guitar with a knife. The man repeated the same phrase three times and he responded to the phrase with the guitar. This new type of music is the earliest known evidence of what we now call “the Blues.” W.C. Handy popularized the term “Blues” in 1912 with his instrumental song “Memphis Blues” in 1912, one of the first blues songs ever transcribed onto sheet music and published.

10 years later, Mamie Smith became the first Black women to ever record vocals for a Blues song with “Crazy Blues” which opened the door for Black female vocalists like Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith to record as well, which helped introduce the Blues to a wider audience.

The Blues is the first popular genre of music to be born out of the culture of African Americans in the southern United States. A synthesizing of work song, spirituals, and country string ballads, this rural music captured the suffering, anguish-and hopes-of 300 years of slavery and tenant farming. Typically, the Blues was played by roaming solo musicians on acoustic guitar, piano, or harmonica at weekend parties, picnics, and juke joints.

In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Ma Rainey says, “The Blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain’t alone. There’s something else in the world.” BB King says, “the language we invented to let people know we had something to say.” These songs were typically full of pain and sorrow. Let’s look at one of Ma Rainey’s songs, “Dream Blues.” <https://genius.com/Ma-rainey-dream-blues-lyrics>.

Note to Educators: *Take a moment to have a conversation with your students about what they think this song is about.*

Now let’s begin the process of creating your own Blues song... What would it be about? What weighs heavy on your mind? Take a moment to think about some of the things that get you down or something that you wish was different. It could be about anything that feels relevant to you today. Maybe it could be about the pandemic or police brutality.

Writing the Blues: Song Elements and Structure

Let’s use some of those answers to write your own blues song. To begin, take a closer look at the AAB Song Form, aka the 12 Bar Blues. The 12 Bar Blues is a common, traditional song form that describes the structure of an individual verse and has no chorus.

You've already heard some of Ma Rainey's work, so we will listen to one of her contemporaries who is mentioned in the show, Bessie Smith. Listen to see if you can find a pattern in the lyrics and/or the melody: *Lost Your Head Blues*, Bessie Smith.

Columbia Records: <https://youtu.be/dYsGYWQT690>

Lost Your Head Blues
Sung by Bessie Smith

I was with you, baby, when you didn't have a dime
I was with you, baby, when you didn't have a dime
Now since you got plenty money, you have thrown your good gal down
Once ain't for always, two ain't for twice
Once ain't for always, two ain't for twice
When you get a good gal, you'd better treat her nice

Did you notice anything particular about the lyrics and/or melody?

Lost Your Head Blues
Sung by Bessie Smith

(A) I was with you, baby, when you didn't have a dime
(A) I was with you, baby, when you didn't have a dime
(B) Now since you got plenty money, you have thrown your good gal down
(C) Once ain't for always, two ain't for twice
(C) Once ain't for always, two ain't for twice
(D) When you get a good gal, you'd better treat her nice

Blues AAB Song Form
What is the AAB song form?

(A) **First two lines:**

- Lyrics and melody are the same
- Forms a question or makes a statement

(B) **Third line:**

- Refrain is different
- Often forms a response or answer to the questions or a comment on any statements made previously

What would your Blues song be about? What weighs heavy on your mind? Take a moment to think about some of the things that get you down or something that you wish was different. It could be about anything that feels relevant to you today. Maybe it could be about the pandemic or police brutality. Once your lyrics are complete, be sure to give your new blues song a title.

Suggested listening for melodies:

<https://open.spotify.com/playlist/276wt9ubHIC4wSeUkyPrek>

Performing the Blues

As you heard in the play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, each band member speaks and acts characteristically of the specific instrument they play. Levee quick and loud like a trumpet, Slow Drag slow and low like a bass, Toledo rambling and resonant like a piano, and Cutler steady and measured like a trombone. If you were an instrument, what instrument would you be? Why?

Blues Band

Now that you've created the lyrics to your blues song, it's time to put together your band and choose a song to record (or in this case, perform virtually).

Rehearsing the Blues

Time to put together your band and rehearse!

1. **Determine** whose **song** will be performed.
2. **Decide** who will be the **singer(s)** and who will be playing which **instruments** in the band. Use your imaginations, your bodies, and your voices to create your musical instrument of choice.
3. Once you know who is doing what, be sure to **rehearse** your selected song together.

Performing the Blues

Before your live "recording", do the following:

1. **Introduce** the singer, name of the band, and song title.
2. **Lead in** with "a one, two, you know what to do..."
3. **Sing/play** at least one full verse of your blues song.

Variation

In addition to the performance, you may also ask students to design their own record album cover.

Reflection

- What was it like to create your own blues song?
- How was it collaborating with others? How did you make decisions over whose song to sing?
- In terms of what the song is about, did singing/writing about it change how you feel about the subject?
- Do you feel more at ease? Do you feel more stressed about it?

PBS Blues Lyric Lesson: <https://www.pbs.org/theblues/classroom/intlyrics.html>

STEW

Objectives

- Share thoughts and reflections to seeing *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.
- Explore how the production connects to your own life.

Activity

On page 44, Toledo says:

"...you just a leftover from history. Everybody comes from different places in Africa, right? Come from different tribes and things. Soonawhile they began to make one big stew. You had the carrots, the peas, and potatoes and whatnot over here. And over there you had the meat, the nuts, the okra, corn... and then you mix it up and let it cook right through to get the flavors flowing together... then you got one thing. You got a stew."

If you're life were a stew, what are the different ingredients that go into it? What is the broth? These are the aromatics that you start the stew with. (garlic, onions, celery, ginger). These flavors represent your past. what you get from your ancestors. Your history. Where you come from.

What is the heart? These are the hearty vegetables, beans, meats, nuts that become the main portion of your stew. These are the different things that make up who you are today. These are your communities, your friends, your hobbies, your activities.

What is the seasoning? These are the different herbs and spices that give it that added kick for your taste buds. These are the things you want that inspire you, that you strive for, that you wish and pray for, what you imagine your legacy to be.

"Now you take and eat the stew. You take and make your history with that stew."