



FILM: **MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM**

FDG RATING: 4.0 ☺☺☺☺○

Film Discussion Group (FDG) Scale is 1-5 (5 is best)

George C. Wolfe: *director*
Viola Davis: *actress, Ma Rainey*
Chadwick Boseman: *actor, Levee*

DATE: February 21, 2021

DISCUSSION SUMMARY: **MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM**

Based on an award-winning August Wilson play, the film *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is also a 2021 Oscar contender for best actress (Viola Davis as Ma Rainey) and best actor (Chadwick Boseman as Levee). Better suited for a stage play than a film, almost all of the action takes place in a run-down recording studio in 1920s Chicago during a sweltering hot summer day as fearless, belligerent, legendary blues singer, Ma Rainey, accompanied by her musicians, Levee, Toledo, Slow Drag, and Cutler, plus her nephew and latest pretty, gal-pal get ready for a recording session. Tensions and temperatures rise as Ma Rainey engages in a battle of wills over control of her music with her white agent, Irwin, who caters to her demanding whims knowing how important it is to complete the recording (for his and the owner's financial benefit), while the studio owner/producer, Mel, has other ideas about what he wants her sing. Meanwhile, in the rehearsal room in the basement, headstrong ambitious trumpeter, Levee, a fast-talking charmer, the youngest of the group, sounds off about staking his own claim in the music industry with the songs he has written that Mel has said he would let him record in his more trendy, swingy style. Levee thinks he knows how to play the white man's game to get what he wants saying, "I can smile and say 'yes, sir' to whomever I please."

Wilson's dialog is always succinct, poignant, and extremely powerful. Toledo describes the plight of Black people in America saying, "The colored man, he's the leftovers." Ma Rainey says, "All they care about is my voice. So, why not make them earn it? They hear it come out," she says of White people listening to the blues, "but they don't know how it got there." Levee's two riveting monologues reveal a breadth of themes from selling your soul to the devil, to where was God when his mother was attacked and raped by eight or nine white men who only stopped when one of the men cut the young Levee's chest.

One film discussion participant observed, "There's a good deal to admire in this movie, but it's fundamentally a filmed play which always has a kind of dissonance for me — they're neither one thing or the other. Especially the scenes of the band in the basement look and sound like they came directly from the stage. So much speechifying, so much melodrama." Another similar comment was that maybe our expectations for a film experience are expansive while plays performed in a stage house are meant to be more intimate. Had we watched a recording of a stage production, we might have felt more engaged. But watching the film version seemed a little off target.

We all agreed that the performances were stellar and believable. As one resident reviewer noted, "Viola Davis' character is authentically pugnacious and tender (not to mention proud, stubborn, and cynically insightful)". If some of us thought Ma Rainey's grease paint make-up was a bit overdone, research showed she did wear excessive make up. And what was her relationship with pretty, flirty, Dussie Mae? Rainey made no attempts to hide her sexual enjoyment of women; in "Prove it on Me Blues," she sang "went out last night, with a crowd of my friends. It must have been women, cuz I don't like no mens."

Levee and Ma are undeniably the live wires of the film. And both are victims of white manipulation but Ma knows the score while Levee naively thinks he has a chance to make it on his talent. It's heart wrenching to see the white band at the end playing his music, songs that Mel "generously" took off his hands for \$5, reneging on his offer to have Levee record them. The traumatic stabbing at the end is devastating and somewhat unexpected although Levee was a hothead and earlier threatened Cutler with a knife. One resident reviewer surmised that we're supposed to think that Levee stands for black men who perform violent acts because of repeated provocations by white men, which put them on the edge of explosion. Viewers can feel the frustration of Ma Rainey and Levee, but Ma has something they want so she can exert her control to some extent while Levee is trapped, powerless.

Despite a few reservations, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* received a standing ovation from our film discussion participants, with a red hot score of 4 on our scale of 1 to 5. (5 is the best).

See you at the movies!

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