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OPINION | THEATER REVIEW

'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom' Review: Really the Blues

August Wilson's 1984 history play looks at a real-life blues singer of the '20s.



Tarra Conner Jones, as Ma Rainey, and the band PHOTO: DON DALY



By

TERRY TEACHOUT

Feb. 4, 2016 6:13 p.m. ET

Sarasota, Fla.

August Wilson's 10 "Pittsburgh Cycle" plays, in which he chronicled the black experience in America, haven't been done nearly often enough in New York since his death in 2005. Only three of them have ever been revived on Broadway. Fortunately, they long ago became staple items in the repertoires of America's regional theaters, and I seek them out whenever I'm on the road. That's what brought me back to Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe, a Florida company that performs black-themed musicals and plays for a largely white audience (Sarasota County, its home base, is only 4% black). I liked what Westcoast Black did with Charles Smith's "Knock Me a Kiss" last January, and I'm even more impressed by its version of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," Wilson's 1984 history play about a real-life blues singer of the '20s (played by Tarra Conner Jones) who outlived her popularity. This small-scale staging, directed by Chuck Smith and

performed in the company's black-box theater, is one of the best-acted Wilson revivals I've seen in recent seasons, and the acting gains in impact from being viewed in so compact a space. It's a very strong production of a very important play.

Not

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe, 1646 10th Way, Sarasota, Fla.

\$36, 941-366-1505, closes Feb. 20

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much seems to happen in "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" until the end of the evening. Rainey and her band (Robert Douglas, Kenny Dozier, Patric Robinson and Henri Watkins) come to a dingy recording studio in Chicago to cut a few tunes. The musicians arrive early, sit around the rehearsal room, swap stories and share a joint. At length Rainey and her entourage show up. After a snarling who's-in-charge-here skirmish with her manager (Stephen Emery) and the producer of the session (Terry Wells), both of whom are white, Rainey finally gets down to business, makes the records and stalks out. *That's* when the bomb goes off, mere seconds before the curtain falls. Up to that moment, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" has been in essence a conversation piece, but one in which the apparently random talk of the characters is in fact pungent and sharply pointed—and leads the audience straight to the brutal last scene like a sizzling train of powder.

You can't write a play in this way without a preternaturally keen ear, and Wilson's ability to quarry glittering nuggets of folk poetry out of the everyday speech of common men ("Levee would complain if a gal ain't laid across his bed just right") remains unrivaled. But you can't stage such a play effectively without actors who can deliver the dialogue in a completely spontaneous-sounding way—and a director who knows how to weld them together into a true ensemble. In this production, Mr. Smith and his cast have hit the high C of absolute authenticity: Every line sounds as real as a heartbeat. I was especially impressed by the four members of the band, and in particular by Mr. Dozier, who plays a world-weary trombonist who just wants to get paid and go home.

In addition to being a convincing actor, Ms. Jones is also a bona fide blues shouter whose straight-from-the-shoulder singing evokes the real Ma Rainey's '20s style without resorting to mere imitation. This

adds greatly to the overall effect of the production, as do Cristy Owen's on-the-button period costumes and Michael Newton-Brown's shabby set, which resembles an old-time recording studio so closely that you can all but smell the hot wax on the turntable.

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"Ma Rainey" was the second play written in the Pittsburgh Cycle, and it contains a couple of stiff spots, especially the scene in which Rainey discourses self-consciously on the meaning of the blues ("You sing cause that's a way of understanding life"). The rest of it, though, is so potent that you'll have no trouble forgiving the flaws. Wilson would write better plays later on, but none more moving—or disturbing—than this one.

—Mr. Teachout is the Journal's drama critic. He is the author of "Satchmo at the Waldorf," which is currently running at Chicago's Court Theatre, San Francisco's American Conservatory Theater and the Seacoast Repertory Theatre of Portsmouth, N.H. Write to him at tteachout@wsj.com.

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