Welcome to the National Theatre's background pack for *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*

This background pack introduces the process of bringing the National Theatre production to life, from auditions through to press night.

Through imaginative and innovative in-school, on-site and online activities, NT Learning opens up the National’s repertoire, artistry, skills, and the building itself, enabling participants of all ages to discover new skills and experience the excitement of theatre-making. If you’ve enjoyed this background pack or would like to talk to us about getting involved in NT Learning activities, please contact us on learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk or 020 7452 3388.

Jane Ball  
Programme Manager, NT Learning  
March 2016

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**Author**  
Ola Ince

**Editor**  
Sorcha McDonagh

**Design**  
NT Graphic Design Studio

NT Learning  
National Theatre  
South Bank  
London SE1 9PX  
T 020 7452 3388  
F 020 7452 3380  
E learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk

The rehearsal and production photographs in this background pack were taken by Johan Persson  

Cover photograph (Sharon D Clarke) by Seamus Ryan.  
Designed by NT Graphic Design Studio

**Further production details:**  
nationaltheatre.org.uk
The National Theatre production of
Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom
by August Wilson

Sturdyvant ________________________________ STUART McQUARRIE
Irvin ________________________________ FINBAR LYNCH
Cutler ________________________________ CLINT DYER
Toledo ________________________________ LUCIAN MSAMATI
Slow Drag ________________________________ GILES TERERA
Levee ________________________________ O-T FAGBENLE
Ma Rainey ________________________________ SHARON D CLARKE
Dussie Mae ________________________________ TAMARA LAWRANCE
Sylvester ________________________________ TUNJI LUCAS
Policeman ________________________________ JOHN PAUL CONNOLLY

UNDERSTUDIES
TERI ANN BOBB-BAXTER (Dussie Mae), JERMAINE DOMINIQUE (Levee),
STEPHEN FAWKES (Sturdyvant/Irvin),
KADEEAM PEARSE (Sylvester/Slow Drag),
RICARDO COKE-THOMAS (Toledo/Cutler), LUCY VANDI (Ma Rainey)

Director ________________________________ DOMINIC COOKE
Designer ________________________________ ULTZ
Lighting Designer ________________________________ CHARLES BALFOUR
Music ________________________________ TIM SUTTON
Sound Designer ________________________________ PAUL ARDITTI
Movement Director ________________________________ CORAL MESSAM
Fight Director ________________________________ BRET YOUNT
Associate Designer ________________________________ SADEYSA GREENAWAY-BAILEY
Associate Sound Designer ________________________________ GILES THOMAS
Company Voice Work ________________________________ JEANNETTE NELSON &
CATHLEEN McCARRON
Dialect Coach ________________________________ HAZEL HOLDER
Staff Director ________________________________ OLA INCE
Production Photographer ________________________________ JOHAN PERSSON

OPENING
Lyttelton Theatre 2 February 2016
Act One
A recording studio in Chicago, 1927
Sturdyvant, speaking through a speaker from the control booth above, asks Irvin to do a sound check on the microphone in the recording studio. He tells Irvin, ‘You keep her in line, okay? I’m holding you responsible for her.’ Irvin asks him not to address him through ‘the goddam horn’, and Sturdyvant eventually emerges to talk in person. He still insists, ‘I’m not putting up with any Royal Highness… Queen of the Blues bullshit!’, though Irvin insists she calls herself the ‘Mother of the Blues.’ Sturdyvant is anxious that the recording session should go like clockwork, and Irvin tells him, ‘You just stay out of the way and let me handle it.’ Sturdyvant reminds him of the last time: ‘She marches in here like she owns the damn place… doesn’t like the songs we picked out… says her throat is sore… doesn’t want to do more than one take.’ Irvin is convinced all will be well this time. Sturdyvant is interested in the band’s horn player. ‘I want to hear more of that sound. Times are changing. This is a tricky business now. We’ve got to jazz it up.’ Irvin admits the records don’t sell in New York, but ‘Look at Memphis… Birmingham… Atlanta. Christ, you made a bundle.’ Sturdyvant is thinking of getting out of this business and going into textiles.

A buzzer sounds. Cutler, Slow Drag and Toledo enter and are greeted by Irvin, who anxiously asks if Ma is with them, and whether the horn player, Levee, is coming. He shows them to the band room to rehearse and offers to call over to the deli for sandwiches. He gives the list of songs they are to record to Cutler, who hands it to Toledo. Toledo reads out: ‘Prove it on Me… Hear Me Talking to You … Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom… and Moonshine Blues.’ Cutler is surprised – ‘Them ain’t the songs Ma told me’ – he doesn’t want any trouble with her over ‘Moonshine Blues’, which is one of Bessie Smith’s songs. He wonders where Levee is, and Slow Drag tells him he’s out buying new shoes with the money he won from Cutler shooting craps. Cutler is more worried about how Levee was behaving at the club last night: ‘Trying to talk to some gal Ma had with her.’ They agree that the girl is out for what she can get, but think Levee wants to impress her with his new shoes. ‘What the hell she gonna do with his shoes?’ asks Cutler. ‘She can’t do anything with the nigger’s shoes.’ [The band members constantly refer to each other as ‘nigger’]. They take a drink of Slow Drag’s ‘good Chicago bourbon’.

Levee arrives and shows off his purchase, but Cutler and Slow Drag are keen to rehearse. Levee remarks that ‘They done changed things around’ in the band room, but Toledo points out that ‘Everything changing all the time. Even the air you breathing change. You got, monoxide, hydrogen… changing all the time.’ Levee is unimpressed and they start to bicker about it. Levee says Toledo has ‘been reading too many goddam books’. Slow Drag still wants to rehearse but Levee says what they’re playing ‘ain’t nothing but old jug-band music’. Slow Drag doesn’t care, as long as they get paid, but Levee insists ‘I’m talking about art!’ Cutler suspects Levee wants to be a ‘virtuoso or something… You ain’t no Buddy Bolden or King Oliver… you just an old trumpet player come a dime a dozen.’ Levee claims he isn’t like Cutler: he has talent and is going to form his own band and make records. He has given Mr Sturdyvant some of the songs he’s written, ‘and he says he’s gonna let me record them when I get my band together.’ Slow Drag asks how he learnt to write music, and Levee says he just picked it up. ‘I knows how to play real music… not this old jug-band shit. I got style!’ Toledo says ‘Style ain’t nothing but keeping the same idea from beginning to end. Everybody got it.’ and Levee ‘can’t even spell music, let alone play it’. They place a dollar bet on this proposition, and Levee loses, by spelling out M-U-S-I-K. Toledo, realising that neither Cutler nor Slow Drag can confirm that Levee has lost, returns the dollar. ‘I done won it, you understand…. But if don’t nobody know but me, how am I gonna prove it to you?’ To back up his point, he tells an anecdote about two fellows, one of whom has taken up ‘church learning’. The other asks him to say the Lord’s Prayer to show his knowledge of the Bible, suspecting he only goes to church to see the Widow Jenkins. The first man, to prove his friend wrong, recites: ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord my soul to keep’. The other says: ‘Here’s your five dollars. I didn’t think you knew it.’ They all laugh though Levee is unconvinced.

Cutler again tries to get them to rehearse, but Levee says he has to finish a song for Sturdyvant. He thinks Toledo’s philosophical talk makes him sound ‘like you got a mouth full of marbles. You the only cracker-talking nigger I know.’ Toledo thinks Levee should
have learned to read ‘then you’d understand the basic understanding of everything.’ Slow Drag asks Cutler to give him a reefer, and Cutler asks why he hasn’t got his own. Slow Drag reminds him of the 22 years they have spent together: ‘We done played the juke joints, the whorehouses, the barn dances, and city sit-downs… I done lied for you and lied with you … and now you don’t wanna give me no reefer.’ Cutler’s response is, ‘Nigger, you still ain’t getting none of my reefer.’ Toledo points out that Slow Drag’s reasoning is ‘African conceptualisation’: trying to solicit something based on a bond of kinship.

Cutler finally gives in and gives Slow Drag the reefer. He counts them in to rehearse ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom’, with the words: ‘One… two… You know what to do.’ Levee is playing a different version from the others and insists Mr Irvin told him to. Cutler is adamant. Levee thinks he’s just jealous, but Cutler says ‘The day I get jealous of you I may as well lay down and die.’ Toledo thinks Levee is just too lazy to rehearse. Cutler decides to rehearse another number until they hear from Mr Irvin. Irvin interrupts to ask about the version of ‘Black Bottom’ and Irvin confirms they will use Levee’s arrangement and Ma will decide on the others. Levee is triumphant and they start to rehearse again, but Cutler is more and more irritated with Levee. As Slow Drag crosses the room to get a new string, he steps on Levee’s shoe, which infuriates him, though Cutler thinks any man who spends a whole week’s pay on shoes is a fool. Levee thinks Toledo wears ‘clodhoppers’, you need shoes like his to dance and have a good time. Toledo believes there’s more to life than having a good time, and they should be thinking about ‘what kind of world they gonna leave their youngens’. Slow Drag thinks the coloured man, having got through slavery, will be all right. However, Toledo says, ‘every living colored man in the world got to do his share.’ Levee is undeterred by their calling him a fool and Toledo saying he ‘ain’t nothing but the devil’. Slow Drag thinks Levee is just too lazy to rehearse. Cutler decides to rehearse another number until they hear from Mr Irvin. Irvin reassures him. The buzzer sounds. Irvin calls down to tell the band their sandwiches have arrived. Sturdyvant hoped the buzzer meant Ma Rainey had arrived. He’s anxious about the time. Irvin reassures him. The buzzer sounds again. Ma Rainey arrives, with a Policeman, Dussie Mae and Sylvester. Ma Rainey tells Irvin he’d better tell the Policeman, who is threatening her with jail, who she is: Madame Rainey! Dussie Mae explains – ‘Sylvester wrecked Ma’s car,’ but Sylvester denies this vehemently (he speaks with a stammer). The Policeman explains that Ma Rainey is to be charged with assault. Sylvester, her nephew, was driving her car when it was involved in an accident. While the policeman was calling a ‘paddy wagon to haul them to the station’, they tried to get into a cab. When the cab driver refused them, she hit him. Sturdyvant comes down to intervene, though Irvin keeps saying ‘Let me handle it.’ The Policeman was taking them in charge, but ‘I figured I’d do you a favour.’ The Policeman explains that Ma Rainey has been turned up. He shows Dussie Mae to the bathroom, and gives the sandwiches to Toledo for the band.

The door buzzer sounds. Irvin calls down to tell the band their sandwiches have arrived. Sturdyvant hoped the buzzer meant Ma Rainey had arrived. He’s anxious about the time. Irvin reassures him. The buzzer sounds again. Ma Rainey arrives, with a Policeman, Dussie Mae and Sylvester. Ma Rainey tells Irvin he’d better tell the Policeman, who is threatening her with jail, who she is: Madame Rainey! Dussie Mae explains – ‘Sylvester wrecked Ma’s car,’ but Sylvester denies this vehemently (he speaks with a stammer). The Policeman explains that Ma Rainey is to be charged with assault. Sylvester, her nephew, was driving her car when it was involved in an accident. While the policeman was calling a ‘paddy wagon to haul them to the station’, they tried to get into a cab. When the cab driver refused them, she hit him. Sturdyvant comes down to intervene, though Irvin keeps saying ‘Let me handle it.’ The Policeman was taking them in charge, but ‘I figured I’d do you a favour and bring her by here. I mean if she’s as important as she says she is…’ Irvin thanks the Policeman, presses money into his hand, says, ‘I’ll take care of everything,’ and shows him out.

Ma introduces Sylvester and Dussie Mae. She complains of the cold and Irvin reassures her the heat has been turned up. He shows Dussie Mae to the bathroom, and gives the sandwiches to Toledo for the band.

In the band room, Levee wonders how Slow Drag can call himself a musician if he’s never been to New Orleans. Slow Drag says ‘Ain’t never been nothing in New Orleans that I couldn’t get in Fat Back, Arkansas.’
Levee tells of a club called Lula White’s where he once saw a man knifed to death by a girl for ‘grabbing her wrong’. He wants to take Slow Drag there and introduce him. Cutler explains how Slow Drag got his name – for his skill on the dance floor, and with women. Toledo tells them about the commotion upstairs and hands out the sandwiches. Levee takes two. Making a comparison with Levee’s greed, Toledo explains about the ‘leftovers from history’. He says that they all came from different tribes in Africa and made up one big stew. ‘You take and make your history with that stew’ but there are leftovers, and ‘the colored man is the leftovers’ after the white man has filled his belly.

Cutler urges them to get on with rehearsing and they finally begin, while upstairs Ma Rainey sings to herself about her aching feet. Dussie Mae has never been to a recording studio before and finds it spooky. Ma Rainey admires the dress she has bought her and plans to buy more clothes tomorrow for her and Sylvester. She says Cutler will show him how his part goes and when he is paid he can send money home to his mother.

Irvin has called the garage to check on Ma’s car which will be ready this afternoon. Ma Rainey wonders what she can hear: ‘I know they ain’t rehearsing Levee’s “Black Bottom”.’ She plans to sing it the old way and has brought her nephew to do the voice intro. Despite Irvin’s protestations about how people want something new, she’s insistent. ‘I don’t care what you say, Irvin. Levee ain’t messing up my song… Now if that don’t set right with you and Sturdyvant… then I can carry my black bottom on back down South to my tour ‘cause I don’t like it up here no ways.’ He caves in and says they will be ready to start in 15 minutes, though Ma Rainey says they will be ready ‘when Madame says we’re ready.’ She introduces Sylvester to Cutler and says he will be recording the vocal introduction. Levee is furious to hear they’re not recording his version. ‘The peoples in the North ain’t gonna buy all that tent-show nonsense. He takes two. Making a comparison with Levee’s greed, Toledo explains about the ‘leftovers from history’. He says that they all came from different tribes in Africa and made up one big stew. ‘You take and make your history with that stew’ but there are leftovers, and ‘the colored man is the leftovers’ after the white man has filled his belly.

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Cutler tells Sylvester what to say, but when he tries to repeat the words, his stammer is overpowering. Levee is triumphant. ‘Let me see you fix that!’ he tells Cutler, and goes to sulk in a corner. However, he jumps up when Sturdyvant comes to check on progress, to the amusement of the other band members. ‘Aw, Levee can’t help it none,’ says Toledo. ‘He’s like all of us. Spooked up with the white men.’ Levee insists he’s not ‘spooked up’ but studies the white man, ‘You don’t know nothing about what kind of blood I got. What kind of heart I got beating here!’ He tells of how, when he was eight, a gang of white men came to his father’s farmhouse in Memphis and raped his mother. He took his father’s hunting knife and tried to kill one of them. The man sliced open his chest with the knife – he shows the scar. His father ‘acted like he done accepted the facts of what happened’, found out the names of the men involved, sold one of them his land, and moved away. He then sneaked back and killed four of them, but was tracked down, hanged and burned. His father’s example taught Levee how to handle white men.

Slow Drag sings ‘If I had my way / I would tear this old building down.’

**INTERVAL**

Cutler explains to Irvin about Sylvester’s problem. Ma Rainey, seeing Levee watching Dussie Mae, warns Cutler ‘You better school him.’ Irvin says they will record ‘Moonshine Blues’ first, but Ma Rainey insists it should be ‘Black Bottom’ and asks for a mic for Sylvester. When Irvin tries to protest about the boy’s stammer, Ma insists: ‘He don’t stutter all the time. Get a microphone down here for him.’ She reassures Sylvester not to worry about ‘messing up’. Cutler counts the band in and Sylvester stutters through the intro. Ma asks them to send out for her Coca Cola, and, as Sturdyvant in the recording booth gets more and more frustrated, she explains to Cutler that she wants to help her nephew. Cutler tells her Levee is OK really, but she thinks ‘he ain’t nothing but bad news’. She tells Dussie Mae to ‘quit flaunting’ herself. Cutler asks Ma about ‘Moonshine Blues’ as he believes it’s one of Bessie Smith’s songs. ‘Bessie what?’ she cries. She says she taught Bessie and now ‘she ain’t doing nothing but imitating me’. She thinks the white manager and record producer care nothing about her for herself, they just want to ‘take my voice and trap it in them fancy boxes’. Once it’s recorded ‘then it’s just like if I’d be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on’. Irvin has been her manager for six years and the only time she’s been in his house was to sing for some of his friends.

In the band room, Levee sings ‘My jelly, my roll’, and can’t wait till Sturdyvant hears him play it. Dussie Mae comes down to ‘see what it looks like down here’, and Levee flirts with her, telling her he’s going to start his own band: Levee Green and his Footstompers. As he told her last night, a man with his own band needs a woman like her. He says ‘What I wanna know is … can I introduce my red rooster to your brown hen?’ She tells him to get his band, ‘then we’ll see if that rooster know how to crow’.

Upstairs Ma thinks it’s too quiet. She needs music. She tells Cutler and Toledo that ‘white folks don’t understand about the blues. They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there.’ She tries to fill the emptiness with something, she says. Slow Drag and Sylvester return with her Coke. Downstairs, Slow Drag interrupts Dussie Mae and Levee.

The recording is ready to begin again, and Cutler counts them in: ‘One… two… You know what to do.’ Once
more Sylvester fumbles the intro; Sturdyvant changes the disc. Ma calmly encourages her nephew, and finally he gets through it. They perform ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom’ to the end, elated, prepare for ‘Moonshine Blues’. But Sturdyvant discovers Sylvester’s mic wasn’t working and they haven’t captured the recording. Irvin investigates and thinks Levee has kicked the plug out, but then finds that the cord is rotted. Ma, furious, prepares to go home. Sturdyvant threatens her: ‘You’ll be through… washed up!’ but Irvin begs him to shut up. She agrees to fifteen minutes more and he sends the band on a break.

Downstairs, Cutler warns Levee to keep his mind on his work: ‘Nigger, don’t you know that’s Ma’s gal?’ Levee says he’s done nothing to Dussie Mae. Toledo admits to having been a fool about women in the past: ‘I done been young. Married. Got kids. I done been around and I done loved women to where you shake in your shoes just at the sight of them.’ But, ‘I ain’t never been the same fool twice. That’s what I can say.’ His wife found the church more important than him, so she left. Cutler believes Toledo wasn’t responsible for his situation, so wasn’t a fool, whereas Levee knows he shouldn’t keep ‘messing with Ma’s gal’. Toledo asks after Cutler’s brother – they used to farm together. Cutler believes he’s now operating an elevator in St Louis. Levee thinks life isn’t fair but Toledo’s opinion is that ‘a nigger gonna be dissatisfied no matter what’. Levee says they have every right to be dissatisfied but Toledo says they’re lucky to be entertainers when they could be ‘hauling wood’ – though Slow Drag, whose father used to ‘haul wood’ thinks that way of life is honest work.

Levee still harps on about selling his soul to the devil, which Cutler believes is blasphemy. Toledo says they sold Africa for the price of tomatoes and sold themselves ‘to the white man in order to be like him’. Levee is affronted – he isn’t an imitation white. He plans to be like Ma and tell the white man what to do. Cutler thinks, however, that it was black people who made Ma Rainey a star; ‘white folks don’t care nothing about who she is… She can’t even get a cab up here in the North.’ He tells a story (which Levee keeps interrupting) about Reverend Gates who got off a train at a small station to check the schedule, and had to walk 200 yards to use a ‘colored rest room’, during which time the train left without him. He found himself surrounded by hostile white men who took the cross from his neck, tore up his bible, and made him dance for their amusement. Levee wants to know ‘where the hell was God when all this was going on?’ He thinks it’s because ‘he a white man’s God’ who ‘hates niggers’. Cutler can’t bear this blasphemy; he punches Levee, knocking him down. The others pull him off but Levee says he’ll give Cutler’s God a chance to save him and pulls out a knife. He rails at God ‘Come and save this nigger! Come on and save him like you did my mamal!’

Upstairs, Ma Rainey sings ‘You wants to be my man / You got to fetch it with you when you come.’ The recording session is finished and Irvin is delighted. Ma Rainey admiringly asks Slow Drag where he learned to play the bass, but thinks Levee plays ten notes for every one he’s meant to. He says he knows what he’s doing and tells them to back off. He doesn’t care if Ma fires him, so she does, telling Cutler he’s out of the band. Levee professes to be glad.

Irvin says he’ll get their money and they worry that he might try to give them cheques which they can’t get cashed in Chicago. Sturdyvant tries to pay Sylvester as part of Ma Rainey’s fee but she insists he must be paid separately. The men pretend this was a mistake, but she says the only mistake was when they found out she hadn’t signed the release forms and goes to leave. She does eventually sign but threatens to take her records elsewhere. Sturdyvant hands out $25 to each of the band members. Levee again asks about his songs, but Sturdyvant doesn’t think they will sell. He does offer $5 for each, but Levee says he wants to record them and that Sturdyvant must hear them. The producer pushes the money at him and hurriedly leaves. Levee throws the cash down. As Toledo walks across the room, he steps on Levee’s shoe. Levee is furious, shoving the shoe in Toledo’s face, and finally takes drastic action.

Cutler asks Slow Drag to fetch Mr Irvin.
Details from the Rehearsal Room

Rehearsals begin at ten o’clock in Rehearsal Room Two. Slowly the room begins to populate and an exciting energy builds. Once everyone has arrived — actors, stage management, designer, associate designer, musical director and associate sound designer — Dominic Cooke, the director of Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, welcomes us to the room and the start of our rehearsal process.

About 30 of us sit around three massive tables and begin to read the play together for the first time. Dominic explains that our text is an amalgamation of two editions. I am instructed to read the stage directions, which are very poetic and descriptive, whilst the actors read their parts. Hearing the actors read is joyous — they are all incredibly talented and have obviously spent time before today preparing for the role. Some people almost seem to know their lines already. August Wilson’s play feels so alive and we are all very aware of our responsibility to honour the play and the playwright.

Ultz [Designer] and Dominic then usher us towards the model box, which is slightly difficult to view due to the large number of people surrounding it. Once around the model box, the company marvel at Ultz’s design. Ultz talks us through the configuration of each scene, moving the figurines around and adjusting the band room so that we get a clear idea of how the playing space works and what the visual language is. The cast asks questions about the set, such as, ‘Where do we enter from?’

Once we’ve read the play and seen the model box, we have a lunch break and begin to get forensic. For the duration of the week we continue to sit around our huge tables reading, dissecting and furthering our understanding of the play. We also go through the play listing facts, questions and thoughts, such as:

It’s around one o’clock. It’s March 1927. There is an anxiety beneath the whole play. No one is feeling confident about the industry they’re in. Sturdyvant isn’t naturally equipped with the skills to deal with artists. Ma Rainey puts obstacles in Irvin and Sturdyvant’s way to remind them that she’s in control. Sturdyvant is the most powerful person in the play. It’s cold. It’s the height of Prohibition. Chicago is a wild city. Dussie Mae is an opportunist. Levee tries to possess everything that Ma Rainey has. There is a feeling that today is going to be a really tricky day. How long ago was the last recording? When did the band get together? What is the name of the recording studio? How far away is the hotel from the recording studio? What was Ma Rainey’s contract with Paramount like? What is new about today? Is Cutler a gambler? Does the list say Levee’s arrangement? And if so, does Toledo choose not to read Levee’s name?

We also figure out the characters’ objectives. Dominic has divided up the play into 22 scenes, which will allow us to discuss and digest the play over the next few weeks.
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.

Rehearsal Call.

Rehearsal Room Two

day

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<th>Activity</th>
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<tr>
<td>9:00</td>
<td>Mr Dyer music with Harry music studio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>Mr Coke Thomas music with Harry (Cornet)</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>Miss Clarke Miss Lawrence Mr Dyer Mr Fagbenle Mr Lucas Mr Lynch Mr McQuarrie Mr Msamati Mr Terera</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Continue on to Sc 13 /sc 14 /sc 15 /sc 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>Mr Pearce with Sandy (bass lesson Studio)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>Approx Lunch</td>
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Rehearsal diary: week two

Chicago 1927

We arrive on Monday morning to find our rehearsal room, Rehearsal Room Two, equipped with props and a temporary set. Rehearsal Room Two is exactly the same size as the Lyttelton stage, which allows us to work as though we are in the theatre.

But before we get to play in our new space we have to ‘meet and greet’ some of the staff at the National Theatre (which involves forming a huge circle and introducing ourselves and our roles).

After a brief meet and greet, and an Equity union meeting, the company gathers around for Ultz’s research presentation. Ultz and Sadeysa [Greenaway-Bailey, Associate Designer] show us pictures from their trip to Georgia, where they visited Ma Rainey’s house and interviewed residents of Georgia to ask about life for African Americans in the early twentieth century.

We have a very ambitious week ahead of us. As we are rehearsing during the Christmas period, we have a reduced amount of time to prepare for the production. Therefore we must always be proactive with our time. This week, that means allowing time to finish our facts and questions. We ended last week on scene 18; therefore we need to look at scenes 19, 20, 21 and 22. We also need to start to stage the play and get deeper into the world of the play: 1927 Chicago. Throughout this rehearsal pack you will find some of the information that we shared.

Throughout the week our rehearsal room is slowly being filled with images of African Americans, Ma Rainey’s house and maps of America; as well as books and DVDs.

On Tuesday we began to put the play up on its feet. The tables were removed and the actors were asked to start to inhabit the stage. Dominic begins each rehearsal with a line run, then the actors are asked to familiarise themselves with their objective and finally they get up and discover their character’s journeys on the stage. Each scene is repeated until the on-stage picture, relationships, and narrative are clear. Over the course of the week we work on scenes 1 to 20. It’s very demanding and painstaking work, but luckily for us the actors are imaginative, brave and detailed. The majority of the cast is almost without their scripts.
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom
Rehearsal Call
Rehearsal Room Two
Monday 14\textsuperscript{th} December

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Activity</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>Meet and greet. <em>(Full Company, including Cover Company)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:15</td>
<td>Health and Safety briefing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:30</td>
<td>Ultz and Sadeysa sharing Research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>Continue to work through play <em>(SC 19/20/21/22, Full company)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>Voice call Stephen <em>in RR1 with Cathleen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>Bass Lesson Kadeem <em>with Sandy Music Studio</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12:00</td>
<td>Fitting JP <em>in costume with Ultz</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00</td>
<td>Fitting Clint <em>in costume with Ultz</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:00</td>
<td>Voice Jermaine <em>in RR1 with Cathleen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1:30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:00</td>
<td>Guitar Lesson Ricardo <em>with James in Music Studio</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2:30</td>
<td>Continue working through the play <em>(Through the PM Jeannette in RR1 with principles as available)</em></td>
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Hit list includes Clint/OT/Lucian
Christmas & New Year

The race is on to complete our challenge of staging the play before the New Year. It's important that we are accurate and thorough before our break. There is a danger that if we haven’t looked at every scene more than once we’ll have forgotten what we created and then run out of time to revisit and recreate when we come back. If we move quickly we should be able to achieve this over the next six days.

As well as continuing to stage the play we are also taking opportunities to deepen our understanding of the world of the play and the events that unfold. For instance, at the start of week three, Finbar Lynch and Stuart McQuarrie, who play Irvin and Sturdyvant, are given an introduction to the world of early recording. John Leonard [a sound designer and sound effects recordist] leads the talk, explaining that Sturdyvant is a fictional Orlando Marsh, a technical freelancer, whom Paramount paid for the use of his recording studio. We learn that Paramount started out as a furniture company; that to make a record was known as to ‘go and cut sides’; that the main worry for a recording sound engineer was volume – if it was too loud they wouldn’t be able to get a cut out of it; that once you set the levels for a recording, that was it; and that each recording disc lasted for three minutes. John also gave Finbar and Stuart an idea of some of the activities that they’d be doing in the booth, which was super helpful, as they might otherwise have been sitting in the booth scratching their noses…

Towards the end of week four we get to grips with the incident that is described by Ma Rainey, the Policeman, Dussie Mae and Sylvester in scene six. As the scene consists of a series of accusations about Ma Rainey and her entourage’s journey to the studio, it is sometimes hard to follow the fast-paced narrative. Therefore Dominic asks the actors involved to share the facts of the scene:

*There is a car crash. Ma Rainey’s fender has been scratched. The policeman comes across the incident and goes to call for assistance. Ma Rainey tries to hail a cab, but is unsuccessful so Ma Rainey and Dussie Mae cross over the road away from the incident to get a cab to the recording studio. Sylvester sees the cabbie threatening his aunt so goes over to the cab and defends her.*

Dominic then asks the actors to draw the incident by hand. They use some of the pictures of Chicago that we have on the rehearsal room walls as reference points and together cast the cabbie (Matthew McConaughey) and the man that crashes into them (Robert De Niro). This is a very useful exercise, which Dominic will refer to throughout the run, because it gives the actors a vigour, clarity and detail when they are defending themselves.

Simultaneously members of the company are being given singing, instrument, and dialect and voice sessions throughout the week. Bret Yount [Fight Director] visits us and has a look at two of the band room scenes in which fights break out between Levee and Cutler and then Levee and Toledo.

All of the members of Ma Rainey’s band are given the opportunity to have a jam session together. Tim Sutton, our Music Director, thinks that it’s very important for them to start listening to each other play and to form musical relationships.
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom.
Rehearsal Call. Rehearsal Room Two
Wednesday 16th December

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Participants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>9.00</td>
<td>Costume Fitting</td>
<td>Mr Terera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>Costume Fitting</td>
<td>Mr Lynch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11.00</td>
<td>Costume Fitting</td>
<td>Miss Clarke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10:00</td>
<td>Sc.4</td>
<td>Mr Dyer, Mr Fagbenle, Mr Msamati, Mr Terera</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>Sc.5</td>
<td>Mr Dyer, Mr Lynch, Mr McQuarrie, Mr Msamati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12.00</td>
<td>Mr Fagbenle Voice with Jeannette in RR3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.30</td>
<td>Lunch</td>
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<tr>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>Mr Fagbenle fitting in the Wig room 5th floor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.30</td>
<td>Continue Sc. 5.</td>
<td>Mr Dyer, Mr Lynch, Mr McQuarrie, Mr Msamati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.00</td>
<td>Mr McQuarrie to break</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.30</td>
<td>Sc.6</td>
<td>Miss Clarke, Miss Lawrence, Mr Connelly, Mr Lucas and Mr Msamati</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.00</td>
<td>Call ends</td>
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Rehearsal diary: week five

Language & Tone

The holiday season is over and now it’s time for us to consolidate all of our work.

The most challenging scenes in the play are the band room scenes as they are lengthy and full of language. As we go over these scenes, especially scene 4, which is about forty minutes long, we begin to realise how much of the play relies on the actors being able to use August Wilson’s language successfully. Dominic explains that the language requires careful attention to punctuation, as the punctuation dictates the tone and rhythm. He also encourages the idea of active listening which means that you really trust in the language, listening out for key words and ideas to challenge later on in the scene. August Wilson has written a band who use each other’s words either to further an idea or squash an idea, but you can only really do that if you listen to each other very meticulously.

As we watch scene 4 it becomes very apparent that it is in a sense a smaller version of the whole play. All of the ideas of the play are discussed within it, because so many big ideas exist within it. It would be easy for it to meander, therefore Dominic is encouraging the company to group ideas and thoughts together – so in a sense allow thoughts to be in chapters/sections. It also becomes apparent that if we aren’t careful we might give too much of the play away, so Dominic suggests that we mellow all of the conflict between characters and think of frustrations being expressed through humorous banter. The idea of family and love is introduced. Ma Rainey’s band is like a family, they may bicker or disagree, but ultimately they love each other.

Wilson has also written a Ma Rainey who is gay, sexually confident and unapologetic. None of the characters comment on this, which feels extremely progressive for the time. As the actors Sharon D Clarke and Tamara Lawrance get closer to their characters, Ma Rainey and Dussie Mae, they begin to explore this sexuality, which starts off as a polite peck and leads to a passionate embrace. It’s key to Dussie Mae’s trajectory in that she is a woman who uses her sexuality to survive and it’s telling of Ma’s character that she wants a young, attractive, sexy woman hanging off her arm. If we want to achieve the idea that Dussie Mae is an opportunist we need to make it clear that she is offering the same sex to Ma Rainey as she is to Levee.

We also explore each character’s physicality, especially in relation to race and power, space and status. Coral, our Movement Director, leads an incredible movement session in which she gets the company out of their heads and into their bodies. The company dance together, pass energy around the room, scat together and then are made aware of the social divides that would have existed in 1927 – the temperature in the room changes, heads bow, eyelines dip and the white characters have freedom and power.
**Timeline: 1927**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JANUARY</th>
<th>JUNE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Singer Eartha Kitt is born.</td>
<td>Dancer, choreographer and director Bob Fosse is born.</td>
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<td>The first transatlantic call is made from New York to London, via radio waves.</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>FEBRUARY</th>
<th>SEPTEMBER</th>
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<tr>
<td>British troops battle for Shanghai.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MARCH</th>
<th>OCTOBER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A Texas law preventing black people from voting is ruled unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court.</td>
<td>Work begins on the construction of Mount Rushmore.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major Henry Segrave sets a new world land speed record of 203.841 mph (Florida).</td>
<td>In baseball’s World Series, the New York Yankees beat the Pittsburgh Pirates in four games.</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>APRIL</th>
<th>NOVEMBER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chinese Civil War begins.</td>
<td>The Jazz Singer is released. The first feature-length motion picture with synchronised dialogue sequences, its release heralds the commercial success of the ‘talkies’ and the decline of the silent film era.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Great Mississippi Flood occurs in Lower Mississippi Valley, affecting 700,000 people.</td>
<td>Ernest Hemingway publishes <em>Men Without Women</em>.</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Volvo car is produced.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Actress Mae West is released after ten days in jail. She, the producers and entire cast of her Broadway play <em>Sex</em> were imprisoned after 375 performances of their comedy-drama.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blind Lemon Jefferson records ‘Match Box Blues’ in Chicago on Okey Records.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gang leader Vincent Drucci is shot and killed while in police custody by Chicago Police Department Detective Dan Healy. The circumstances of his death sparked some controversy.</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MAY</th>
<th>DECEMBER</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To the Lighthouse by Virginia Woolf is published.</td>
<td>Japan start to build their great railway system.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles Lindbergh completes the first solo flight across the Atlantic.</td>
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<tr>
<td>An earthquake measuring 8.6 on the Richter scale strikes China, killing 200,000 people.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The US Supreme Court rules that profiting from illicit trafficking in liquor will be taxable.</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Adjustments

To gain a clear perspective, we spend the majority of the week running sections of the play. After a section is run, Dominic shares his thoughts with the cast, suggesting areas of improvement and then works on those suggestions with them, for example:

- Don’t get stuck in fixed relationships.
- Be careful not to ‘retreat to your cave’ too often. Journeys back to cave need to be about leaving in a position of strength, not weakness.
- Work through your arguments. Change people’s minds.
- Be aware of when you’re introducing new ideas.
- Be in a state of readiness all of the time.
- Technically pick up on cues and tighten gaps.
- Speak as you think.
- Really pronounce the end of your lines: a lot of your storytelling is in the end of your lines.

Putting it Together

We have reached our final week in Rehearsal Room Two. Over the last few weeks we have gone through the entire play with a fine-tooth comb and are ready to attempt our first full run. Everyone is excited to put all of the elements of the play together. Running a play for the first time is a crucial process as it highlights which sections of the play need developing, you get a better understanding of the characters’ trajectory and the actors understand what the demands of the play are.

We spend the whole week running the play, learning how to build stamina both emotionally and physically. We become aware of how the play works as a tragedy, how important it is to keep the scenes active and driven and how we’ll have to create more visual narrative when the set is moving from recording studio to band room.
Timeline: Ma Rainey and US History

1861 Civil War begins.
1865 Civil War ends; slavery is abolished.
1866 KKK is founded.
1867 14th and 15th amendments are ratified, making it harder for black people to vote.
1868 Ma Rainey is born ‘Gertrude Pridgett’ to Ella and Thomas Pridgett in Georgia on 26 April. She is the second of five children.
1896 Mr Pridgett dies.
1900 Ma Rainey starts performing professionally as a minstrel show performer in the Bunch of Blackberries revue.
1902 Ma Rainey first hears the blues in Missouri; she later incorporates the blues into her set.
1904 Ma Rainey marries William ‘Pa’ Rainey at the age of 18. Pa Rainey is a dancer, singer and comedian some years older than her. Together they become a song and dance team, with Pa continuing to do comedy too.
1907 Madam Cj Walker develops and markets her hair-straightening method for black women.
1912 Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith allegedly work together on at least two travelling shows.
1914 Ma Rainey and her husband tour with Tolliver’s Circus and Music Extravaganza billed as ‘Rainey and Rainey, Assassins of the Blues’.
1920 US women get the vote.
1923 Ma Rainey transitions from Southern minstrel star to national recording artist when she signs to Paramount. In 1923 she records eight songs.
1925 Ma Rainey is arrested for an indecent party with some chorus girls. All of the chorus girls manage to escape before the police arrive, but Ma Rainey is unable to get dressed in time.
1927 Ma Rainey makes more than 19 recordings for Paramount.
1928 Ma Rainey stops recording with Paramount.
1929 Wall Street Crash.
1930 The Great Depression.
1935 Ma Rainey’s mother and sister die and Ma Rainey retires from the stage. She is thought to have managed theatres during her retirement.
1939 Ma Rainey dies of a heart attack on 22 December.

Notes

- Gertrude Pridgett was baptised as a child at the First African Baptist Church.
- Ma Rainey was in the theatrical business for a little over 35 years.
- In the early 1910s, Ma Rainey performed with many troupes, as well as headlining shows such as the Smarter Set, the Florida Cotton Blossoms, Shufflin’ Sam from Alabama, and the Rabbit Foot Minstrels.
- On stage, Ma Rainey became a big mama and at once a comic and actual sex symbol.
- A large part of her appeal was her material – songs drawn from folk sources and originals, unblushing in their treatment of human sexuality and unselfconsciously rural in their descriptions of superstition and chain gangs.
- Madame Rainey was a short, heavy, dark-skinned woman with luminous eyes, wild, wiry hair, and a large mouth filled with gold teeth. Ma Rainey was described as compassionate, with a maternal nature.
- Between 1923 and 1928 Ma Rainey recorded at least 92 songs exclusively for Paramount Records Company, a relatively small, Wisconsin-based operation, with a limited budget compared to its major rivals.
- All of Ma Rainey’s recordings were made in either Chicago and New York.
- Of all the female blues star of her magnitude, Ma Rainey was the least commercialised by non-blues influences, and her material showed the strongest affinity to the folk blues tradition.
- Ma Rainey had an apartment in Chicago.
- Ma Rainey was arrested for buying bootleg jewellery, however she was unaware that it was bootleg.
- Ma and Pa Rainey adopted a son called Danny. When Pa died, Ma married a younger man who was not in show business.
Rehearsal diary: technical rehearsals and previews

Don’t look down if you’re afraid of heights

Everyone who walks into the Lyttelton Theatre on Friday is impressed by the simplicity of the set and the magic of the extending stairs. The stairs that link the band room to the studio and control room grow when the band room elevates and the control booth rises. Over the next few days Stuart and Finbar must become masters of those stairs, which initially are quiet daunting, especially as they sway slightly when you walk up and down them at a height.

The production team sit in the auditorium surrounded by desks, screens and dials, communicating with stage management and operators via headset, whilst the actors appear on stage in their custom-made period costumes looking gorgeous.

The aim of the week is to make sure that the play that we have rehearsed and imagined in Rehearsal Room Two arrives in the Lyttelton. This means that we need to make sure that the sound, music, lights, costume and set all merge together and help to support the work that we have created. It’s a huge ambition, but we’re adamant we will achieve this. We work tirelessly and merrily through technical rehearsals into preview week, constantly improving the play. Every morning the actors come in for notes, and then rehearse technical elements before they perform in front of a paying audience.

During the week we cut scene 20, which enables the play to gather momentum exactly where we need it to, so that the last few moments of the play feel taught and tense. We change Dussie Mae’s dress so that it is the bright canary yellow that August Wilson describes, we add in extra journeys for Strudyvant and Irvin to cover our transitions from studio to band room, we change the position of the blood in the tragic murder of Toledo so that it is easier for O-T to access, allowing him to concentrate on his performance. We work on maintaining pace and energy so that the play never feels reflective or stagnant. We also adjust our rhythm slightly to allow space for the audience’s laughter and applause, a lot of which we hadn’t expected. We end up having to give Slow Drag’s rendition of ‘Rambling Man’ a button (a musical full stop) because the audience explode into applause and trample over the next few lines if we don’t.

The company work very long days, but we all soldier on until we are confident and satisfied with our work.
Interview: Dominic Cooke

Ola Ince spoke to Dominic Cooke, the director of the play, during the rehearsal process

How did you come across the play?
I read the play a long time ago, and I didn’t really remember it that well. Then for some reason – I have no idea why – I suddenly thought ‘oh I should read that play,’ a couple of years ago. I can’t even remember what led me to reread it, but I did, and I immediately wanted to do it. So then I suggested it straight away to Rufus [Norris, Director of the National Theatre] and he wanted to do it. Maybe I was thinking about what I would like to do at the National, because I was going to get involved here. What would be a good play now for the times we are in and for the space – a big, main-space play. I think that’s how I came across it again.

What is the world of the play?
The world of the play is 1927 Chicago. It’s about fault lines. It’s on a fault line between the blues age and the jazz age, and he uses that moment to talk about the position of African-American people in the USA; the relationships between them and the white people. It’s a play about power and culture really, where power sits and how the control of culture is key to maintaining power. It’s also a play about art and who owns art, the frontiers between art and the marketplace; so it’s quite a big, ambitious play, which I love. I like plays that have big canvases. It’s only got ten people in it but what he’s talking about is huge.

How does music and sound feature in your particular production?
We’re pretty strict. We use pretty much what was written in the play. August Wilson is very careful about how he uses it. He does things like the song ‘Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom’ – it goes wrong about four times before you hear the actual song. It’s like a metaphor for things not working, and then things do work and it goes wrong again. So he’s very careful. I wanted to use what he put in, because I think he thought about the music so carefully and its position in the play. I tried not to use too much sound before the song (although we did put some sound cues in because we needed help with the transitions) but it was very deliberate not to start the play with music and not to have any music before the band come on stage.

So for you it’s really about serving the playwright?
Yeah in a way, yeah it is. I mean you’re always interpreting all the time. As soon as you cast an actor, you’ve made an interpretation. So we just try to ask, ‘Why did he do that?’ He also writes the musicality into the spoken word element of the play. The scene of the band, the especially long scene, is written very much like the band itself. You’ve got the loud Levee on top of everything and he is erratic and crazy and free form. Then you’ve got Slow Drag holding centre like the bassist. So he’s written the characters and their instruments and the way that they express themselves, and they’re all deeply linked, which is amazing. The play is really full of music.

It’s not a musical, it’s a play with music that talks about the world. I just thought: ‘listen to the writer’.

What has been the most challenging thing about directing this production?
The most challenging thing to be honest was that I was incredibly tired when I started, so my ability to deal with the day-to-day of directing a play was harder! I mean the play is so good and the cast are so good, I didn’t really have that many struggles. You’re always pushing people to challenge themselves. This is a play about power so if you’re talking about power you have to challenge people’s reactions to it. At some point you have to challenge their understanding of what power is, what real power and authority are and how they work. So there is always an element when you’re trying to do deep work with actors where you have to challenge and there is a bit of discomfort around that. Also, there’s an element of experience in this play that I suppose is equally remote for all of us – none of us lived in 1927 Chicago, none of us are Americans and most of us aren’t professional musicians so there’s a big imaginative leap for everyone.

I always thought that the challenge for the actors would be to really imagine themselves into a pre-civil rights consciousness. The civil rights movement has been such
a paradigm for the way we talk about human rights – our collective sense of self owes a lot to that moment. All the other things that happened: feminism, gay rights, and so on, but also just our idea of individualism, our right to determine our lives – such a prevalent idea for our society – owes a lot to its genesis in the civil rights movement. Obviously for black people it completely shifted the thinking.

What is so brilliant about what Wilson does is that he’s very honest about what happened – the very narrow range of options for African-American people at this time. For example, someone like Ma Rainey, who is probably at the top rung of African Americans at the time, still has very little power and control over her destiny and what she creates. So I think getting ourselves into that zone was a challenge for everyone. We just had to make sure we were really honouring that. There were moments when I had to say, ‘I don’t think you’d really speak to a white person like that,’ because you didn’t have that freedom and you had to find a way of making a point within this deferential way of speaking, which I think is very important in the play. It’s one of the reasons why things explode so much in the end – because people aren’t really able to express themselves properly. To realise the force of what he has written, you have to really honour that. And also to honour the difference between the way characters speak when there are black characters in the room and white characters is also very important. I love the lack of sentimentality in the writing. There’s a lot of historical writing these days that is wishful thinking. You see this on television; something set in the 1930s or 1950s and people are so much more aware of things than they actually would have been. The consciousness is wrong because people didn’t have access to these kinds of ideas. Obviously Toledo is more conscious than the other black characters in the play but he’s on his own, he’s seen as a weirdo, he’s not the mainstream.

What do you hope an audience will take away from the production?
I hope they take away a complex understanding of the way power operates in relation to race and culture, because I think that’s what he’s dealing with. I also hope they take away a good, enjoyable, emotional experience. The play is very empathetic.

I get drawn very much to American writing, it’s not a conscious decision, but I find that American playwrights tend to be much more emotional. They tend to be very empathetic. If you think about Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, I definitely put August Wilson in that bracket, O’Neil and others. I’ve worked with contemporary American writers and they’re not frightened of emotion. British people generally tend to be much more fearful and anxious about expressing feelings. But I think theatre is such an emotional medium that I often feel more at home with American writers than I do with British.
Interview: O-T Fagbenle

Who is Levee?
Levee is a 32-year-old African-American musician, originally from Mississippi, but currently recording for a touring band in Chicago. He is a person with a very large, very sensitive ego, which constantly needs to be maintained, reflected and reinforced by other people, not least by himself. And when it isn’t, it is very painful for him, so he reacts in an extremely explosive way against that because that’s how he gets his sense of self. Ultimately his lack of real self-confidence comes from the insecurity of a trauma that he experienced as a child. He’s very talented. He’s a visionary, and he’s very interested in looks and aesthetics and style.

How have you gone about creating him?
The fundamental starting point for every character is the script. That is step one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine and ten. So really for me the first thing is to read the script and to have an understanding of the character written in its context within the play. I always think that my first duty is comprehension. I have to understand what August [Wilson] has written.

After that there are lots of different things that I do to connect with the character. I often think of what things in me are already like Levee, these might be in really small doses but it’s about me turning up the amplifier on those parts of myself. A friend of mine once told me that if you’re creating art and you aren’t in some way embarrassed when people see it then you aren’t really exposing anything of yourself, and therefore your art is shit. And really the challenge is to expose something of yourself, so that’s one of the main things.

With Levee there are also some technical things to get right. In the show I play a cornet, piano and have a bit of a drum solo on a piece of wood, and so there are technical aspects for me to get, along with the accent, which needs to be practiced. And I got trumpet lessons.

I also managed to take myself down to New Orleans where Levee in his own words says: ‘How can you call yourself a musician if you’ve never been to New Orleans?’ so I set myself that target and while I was there I immersed myself in the world of musicians and I played on the streets of New Orleans with a street band and I met locals there. I tried to go down to the hood. I interviewed people, I spoke with people, I managed to find one of only three actors who, according to himself, has acted in all of Wilson’s ten plays. His name was Wilbert L Williams Jr. He was so useful. We spoke about August [Wilson] and his productions and I recorded a lot of people there. I recorded people I found on the street, people I met, and also Will. I recorded a lot of him doing parts of the show so that I could get idiosyncratic words, which are hardest to get, ‘Florsheims’, ‘old brogans’, names of places like Moultrie. I’m interested in people and places anyway so it’s just a motivation to do that.

There’s more detailed script work I do and there’s like a series of exercises which I go through, things like ‘beats’, which we did in rehearsals. But before rehearsals started I’d already beaten and given a title to each section of the play from Levee’s perspective. I even renamed the title of the play. I think I renamed it The Rise and Fall of Levee Green and his Footstompers or something like that – I can’t remember.

I make a list of what everyone says about me in the play. I make a list of everything I say about myself in the play. I’m telling you a tenth of the things I did and thought about and experimented with. I even spent time, I still do spend time just as Levee at home. I can go out into the streets and talk to people in character.

I guess things change and you have another actor in front of you and start developing relationships. You know, it’s hard to go through it because ultimately I did three years of training to learn loads of tools for breaking down the script. And then I did ten years of being a professional to continue that. But fundamentally, it comes down to instinct and intuition, and all those tools really for me are about finding ways to motivate your intuition and to challenge your intuition. But fundamentally it’s not an intellectual process, it’s a more spiritual one.
Interview: O-T Fagbenle

What’s your favourite scene or moment in the play and why?
Depends what you mean by favourite. There are scenes which are fun – I like doing the dance and the song. I like my scene with Dussie, but those are safe, happy scenes, so that’s why I enjoy them. I find the ending very challenging. I find the bit when I talk about what happened with my mum, my challenge with God. These are real acting challenges and so those are some of my favourites because those are the things that challenge me about doing a part – it’s really exploring the further reaches of one’s own psyche and the psyche of a character. I also love listening to my fellow actors’ speeches. Some of my favourites are: Giles’ [Terera, who plays Slow Drag] speech about the man who sold his soul to the devil, Clint’s [Dyer, who plays Cutler] speech about the bullying of a pastor in Sigsbee and Lucian’s [Msamati, who plays Toledo] one about how he lost his wife, which I find heartbreaking.

What do you hope an audience will take away from the production?
I’ve got a friend who is an artist and I always used to ask her what her art means and she’d say to me ‘it’s irrelevant, what it means, the only thing that is relevant is what you get from it. I curated it, but what is relevant is what your reaction to it is.’ I thought that was a really interesting way of looking at things and I kind of believe that. I don’t want to manage someone else’s reaction to it, but I can say for me, the way it affected me, it made me think about the way trauma affects people later on in their life. People with huge egos usually have huge emotional problems and people might leave with a greater understanding of that, an understanding of the way people in power exploit power and how those dynamics can have unintended consequences. And also just appreciate the diversity and complexity within the African-American people. You know I think very often we are subjugated to stereotypes of these people and what August does so well is show the variety even in a specific world of musicians and so that’s what I took from it. But I’m really excited to hear what other people took from it.