



Theater: Near "Encounter," Far "Ma Rainey"



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

Theater: Near "Encounter," Far "Ma Rainey"

10/11/2016 12:17 am ET | Updated Oct 11, 2016

THE ENCOUNTER ** out of ****

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM *** out of ****

THE ENCOUNTER ** out of ****

JOHN GOLDEN THEATRE

For more than 30 years, the British theater company Complicite has specialized in unpromising sounding nights of theater — lectures on math! lectures on memory! — that prove compelling. Ironically, they're appearing on Broadway with a show that sounds superficially intriguing — an unconventional blending of live performance and auditory immersion! — but proves one of their least successful outings.

I'm not sure what drew co-founder Simon McBurney to conceive, direct and perform this show based on the book *Amazon Beaming* by Petru Popescu. It's the true-ish story of a photographer named Loren who heads deep into the Amazon, tracks down a "lost" tribe of people named the Mayoruna beset by humanity's hunger for oil, becomes a part of their journey to return to "the beginning," almost loses his life and returns with no film of these people but a remarkable story. (Oh and he communicated with them telepathically.)

Loren's encounter took place in 1969, the year this tribe made its first permanent contact with the outside world. His story feels deeply dated in its attitude toward both these people and our modern world. However much one may agree to one degree or another, the idea of "primitive" people somehow being inherently superior while modern man is burdened by all our "things" feels more hippie dippie than insightful. Nothing in McBurney's adaptation of Popescu's work elevates the material beyond this baldly simplistic take. So what we're left with to engage our minds is how he tells it.

The “how” is the only interesting element of the show but it’s the main one. McBurney holds the stage with various microphones and other equipment. He interacts with the tape-recorded dialogue of his daughter, plays various roles by filtering his voice and uses loops to build up the sounds of the jungle for atmosphere. That sound design is created by Gareth Fry and Pete Malkin.

Their work and McBurney’s display of it offers the old-time appeal of watching a live performance of a radio play, where you can delight in the mundane and interesting ways various sounds are created. Certainly it’s not cutting edge in any particular way, but it does have a hand-made appeal one might not have expected from a show where high tech seemed the order of the day and the audience dons headphones right at the start.

The problems are many, starting with the layered approach to the story. We are watching McBurney tell the story of his writing of the show and below that the adventure of the photographer Loren and below *that* the story of the endangered tribe, most of it filtered by the perspective of the writer Popescu. Our remove from the heart of the matter is so extreme it’s hard to gin up much enthusiasm for anything other than the welcome distraction of McBurney’s little daughter, a child who takes advantage of her mother being away to stay awake, insist she can’t get to sleep and demand treats and another bed time story and so on. It’s a minor aside but also — unfortunately — the most human and engaging element of the show.

Another problem is the setting. A work of art needs the ideal frame and certainly a play needs the right space — as proven by the dance of shows this season from one Broadway house to another. Complicite certainly *deserves* to be on Broadway in terms of quality. But it just feels wrong for this particular show to be there; surely St. Ann’s or BAM or the Public would have been a more natural home. It wouldn’t improve the material in the least, but somehow it would be presented to better effect.

Some have suggested that *The Encounter* should have simply been a podcast. That’s unfair and untrue: this is a theater piece and McBurney fills the stage with his commitment and some visual panache, such as a mad

fever dream in which all of America turns its back on materialism and burns up its possessions in bonfires that spread from home to home across the entire nation. About the only element of the show that does work is McBurney's toying with audio effects and all of that would be essentially lost in a podcast.

That may also be why I'm especially disappointed in this show from one of my favorite theater companies. *The Encounter* promised to shine a spotlight on audio design, arguably the most overlooked and unappreciated element of theater craft today. But when a story doesn't hold your attention, no one is going to care very much how you told it.

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM *** out of ****

TWO RIVER THEATER

You know you're in good hands with director Ruben Santiago-Hudson. If he's directing a mounting of a play from Wilson's Century Cycle anywhere in the country, you know it's going to reach a certain standard. And so I was happy to venture out of New York City for my first (but not last) trip to Two River Theater in Red Bank, New Jersey to see my first full production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. (I also saw Santiago-Hudson's direction of a radio play mounting of the show, essentially a reading but a very rich and satisfying one.)

Two River is an impressive regional theater space with two venues, including the handsome main-stage where I saw *Ma Rainey*. The tech elements of the show were of the highest quality, including costumes, lighting, sound and especially a set by Charlie Corcoran worthy of Broadway in its lavish detail and well thought-out dramatic effect. If you've seen the new Signature Theater home on 42nd Street, that will give you a sense of this venue's scope. They've promised to tackle every drama in Wilson's ten play saga and I won't hesitate to return there to see more.

Now on to the play itself. Set in the 1920s, it tells the story of Ma Rainey, the Mother of the Blues who mentored Bessie Smith, only to see that upstart become a bigger star and outsell Ma by a large degree. Ma could still move race records but she long ago realized the game: on the road, she was the boss. In the studio, the white men were going to make every dime off her they could and there wasn't much she could do about it. But until they captured her voice on record, she held the power. And Ma made the most of it, singing the songs she wanted, the way she wanted, with the arrangements she wanted. And she wasn't *about* to open her mouth until they got her a cold Coca-Cola because they knew Ma Rainey won't sing until she's got her Coca-Cola in hand.

But just as Ma Rainey is no longer the star of the circuit, she's not the star of this show. The sidemen are the heart of the story here, with musicians rehearsing the songs, bantering back and forth, cadging a bit of reefer or a snort of liquor and generally making hay while they wait for Ma Rainey to show up. All four musicians are so vivid, it's doubly insulting that Ma's white manager (ably performed by the marvelous Michael Cumpsty) can't ever remember their names. Cutler (James A Williams) is the leader of the band; Toledo (Brian D. Coats) the voice of wisdom; and Slow Drag (Harvy Blanks) the good-time cut up.

Those three each spar at one time or another with Levee (Brandon J. Dirden), the sexy trumpet player looking to move in on Ma's new sweetheart, get his arrangements performed on Ma's records and then start his own band with original hot tunes that he's sure will get the folks swinging. Levee is the dominant character and Dirden makes the most of him, delivering a fully realized performance that captures this man in all his complex, desperate, doomed and appealing glory.

Wilson's plays are so rich that I'm finding it takes a production or two before I can start to wrap my mind around all that's going on. I've read them all at least once, seen them all at least once (albeit just a radio production of *Gem Of The Ocean*) and originally I slotted *Ma Rainey* as a "lesser" Wilson play. "Lesser" in this context means very, very good and even great but not *quite* one of the towering masterpieces of Wilson at his best. I remembered it as slightly more compact and straightforward than the marvelous sprawl of *Joe Turner's Come And Gone*, for example.

Well, I was wrong. The monologues in which Levee recounts the brutal rape of his mother by white men and how his father aw-shucked his way around the white men who did it (all while plotting his revenge) was wrenching. As were stories of the legendary gospel figure Rev. Gates being humiliated when he's stranded in a small town or the hilarious tale of Slow Drag making the move on a man's girl right in front of him. The stories come tumbling out and you hear Wilson tackling race and religion and the music industry and how black people deal with white people and how black people deal with one another and the ways white people poison even that. It's tight and funny and deep and I don't think I've begun to sound the depths of it yet. Seeing Wilson again and again is like seeing Shakespeare again and again; if there's a play of his you think

you don't really like as much, you just haven't seen the right production yet.

In my ideal, dream production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the musicians would be playing their instruments, though that's a heavy lift given the demands of the parts and the music they play. Happily, the singing is live and very satisfying. Arnetia Walker's Ma Rainey is a bit toothless (at this stage her bark seems much worse than her bite) but I could see how that take works, even though one expects Rainey to barrel in and take over the show. Similarly, Chanté Adams cut a fine figure as Ma's new flame but was a tad inconsistent, though on target in her scenes with Levee. In contrast, Marcel Spears was very good as the stuttering Sylvester, a role that can be easily seen as mere comic relief. And Peter Van Wagner kept the record label owner a genuine, if quietly merciless, figure.

Williams and Blanks were very appealing throughout. Though it was the final performance, Coats had a few subtle stumbles on his lines. And yet, he was deeply appealing as Toledo, giving this fount of wisdom (or know-it-all-ness, if you're Levee) a rounded empathy. Levee dominates effortlessly, but the play is so rich you can imagine a production that left you feeling Toledo or even Cutler or Ma was its beating heart. Of course, with Wilson, they all are.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2

Prodigal Son **

A Bronx Tale: The Musical **

Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **

Nice Fish ***

Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***

Hughie **

Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2

Straight ** 1/2

Eclipsed ***

Red Speedo ***

The Royale ** 1/2

Boy ****

The Robber Bridegroom ***

Hold On To Me, Darling ***

Blackbird ** 1/2

Disaster! *

The Effect ** 1/2

Dry Powder ** 1/2

Head Of Passes ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2

The Crucible (w Ben Whishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

Nathan The Wise ** 1/2

The Father **

American Psycho **

Waitress ** 1/2

Fully Committed ** 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night ***

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) ***

Tuck Everlasting **

War **

Paramour * 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) ** 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) **

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) **

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) ***

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the founder and CEO of the forthcoming website BookFilter, a book lover's best friend. Trying to decide what to read next? Head to BookFilter! Need a smart and easy gift? Head to BookFilter? Wondering what new titles came out this week in your favorite categories, like cookbooks and mystery and more? Head to BookFilter! It's a website that lets you browse for books online the way you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases every week in every category and offers passionate personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview or holiday gift guide — but every week in every category. He's also the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podcast

that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his website and hisdaily blog. Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called Popsurfing and also available for free on iTunes.

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.