



PRESS RELEASE

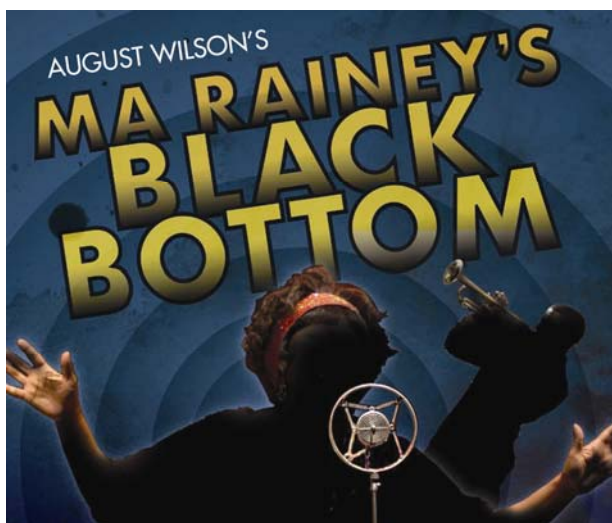
For Immediate Release

Tuesday, August 19, 2008

CONTACT: Patrick Finlon, PR Director

315-443-2636 or pjfinlon@syr.edu

Timothy Bond's Directing Debut
Ma Rainey's Black Bottom



Dates: September 9-October 4, 2008

Previews: September 9-11

Opening weekend: September 12-13

*Press opening: 8:30 p.m. on Saturday, September 13

Tickets available at the Syracuse Stage Box Office at 820 East Genesee Street,
by telephone at 315-443-3275 or SyracuseStage.org.

(Syracuse, NY)—Producing Artistic Director Timothy Bond will make his Syracuse directing debut with *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, the Tony Award-winning play that launched August Wilson's ten-play chronicle of African American life in the 20th century. Cast members include Ebony Jo-Ann as Ma Rainey (Kennedy Center and understudy for both Broadway productions) and Thomas Jefferson Byrd as Toledo (Tony nominee for Best Actor in the Broadway revival.) Syracuse Stage recommends *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* for mature middle-school students and up. *Running* September 9— October 4, the exclusive sponsor for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is M&T Bank. Media sponsors are Urban CNY, WAER 88.3 and WCNY Connected. Syracuse Stage season sponsors are The Post-Standard and Time Warner Cable.

Inspired by the real-life Mother of the Blues, Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* takes place over a single day of making music, making jokes and making deals. A young, ambitious horn player named Levee arrives with new band arrangements including one for a popular dance called *The Black Bottom*. But Ma

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insists on singing it the “familiar” way. The other band members—Cutler, Toledo and Slow Drag—follow suit, warning Levee about butting heads with Ma and teasing him about his new shoes. As the day unfolds and Ma’s demands are met, Levee cracks. He succumbs to the harsh realities of unjustly thwarted aspirations, revealing the self-destructive consequences of misdirected anger and violence.

“*Ma Rainey* is a powerful hybrid of theatre—part musical and part drama,” said Bond, who points to the ‘barbershop humor’ as one of his favorite things about the play. “But ultimately it’s about Levee and his journey. It’s a play that celebrates the blues, the struggle of African Americans to have their voice.” As proof of that struggle, the obituary of the real-life Ma Rainey listed her profession as ‘housekeeping.’

Layers of social power and hierarchy are illustrated by William Bloodgood’s scenic design, with three levels for the actors. The rehearsal room is lowest—it’s cold and unfinished to represent the level of hell or purgatory. Above that is the recording studio, a place where hope lives, where Levee dreams of making it big. And finally at the top sits the recording booth, looking down over the performers, where decisions are made by the white manager and white producer. Said Bond, “I think these hierarchical levels are important in understanding the weight of pressure coming down on Levee, which builds to the catastrophic, final note of the play.”

Blues music composed by Michael G. Keck is present throughout, providing a voice for hope and struggle. “The more music you got in the world, the fuller it is,” says Ma. “You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ‘cause that’s a way of understanding life.”

“It’s about American history, it’s about all our histories no matter what your cultural background,” said Bond. “Wilson’s plays speak to you as a human being, they speak to you about the African-American experience in this country, which is the history of America. I think he has proven himself to be one of the top playwrights, certainly in the 20th century, but I think he will be remembered for many centuries to come.”

BACKGROUND

The Play

August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* opened on Broadway in 1984, launching Wilson’s 10-play chronicle of African American life in the 20th century. In 1985, *Ma Rainey* won a Tony Award for Best Play and a Drama Desk Award for Outstanding New Play. Themes and conflicts in *Ma Rainey* can be found throughout Wilson’s cycle: jazz v. blues, males v. females, guys trying to become men, old guns schooling the young guy, migration from south to north, clashes between southern and northern African Americans, and clashes between older and younger generations.

The Person

The real-life Gertrude “Ma” Rainey was signed to Paramount Records in 1923 as one of their first African American artists. Ma’s style was authentic Southern-folk, punctuated with moans, slurs and glissandos. Although a more “sophisticated” sound

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started to become popular towards the end of her career, Ma's recordings stayed true to her Southern, rural roots of growing up in Georgia. Nicknamed the "Mother of the Blues," it is rumored that Ma Rainey taught Bessie Smith how to sing the blues.

August Wilson at Syracuse Stage

Recently Stage announced a commitment to completing August Wilson's ten-play chronicle of African American life in the 20th century. Stage has previously produced four plays in Mr. Wilson's cycle: *Fences* (1991), *The Piano Lesson* (1996), *Jitney* (2002) and *Gem of the Ocean* (2007). After *Ma Rainey*, the remaining plays are *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Seven Guitars*, *Two Trains Running*, *King Hedley* and *Radio Golf*.

CAST

The cast for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* includes actors from Broadway, television and film, as well as students from the Department of Drama in Syracuse University's School of Visual and Performing Arts.

Ebony Jo-Ann (Ma Rainey) recently appeared in *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in the Kennedy Center's presentation *August Wilson's 20th Century*. She also understudied the title role of *Ma Rainey* for both Broadway productions in 1984 (for Theresa Merritt) and in 2003 (for Whoopi Goldberg). Ebony had a triumphant run with her band, *The Blackgold Ensemble*, at Harlem's Lenox Lounge, and she is a 6-time Vivian Robinson AUDELCO Award winner.

Thomas Jefferson Byrd (Toledo) received a Tony nomination for Best Actor for the role of Toledo in the 2003 Broadway production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. He has appeared in several films directed by Spike Lee: *Bamboozled* (as Hunnicutt), *He Got Game* (Sweetness), *Get On the Bus* (Evan, Sr.), *Clockers* (Errol Barnes), and *Girl 6* (Caller 17).

Warner Miller (Levee) recently appeared at Geva Theatre and Indianapolis Repertory Theatre as Lymon in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. He has appeared in two HBO films: *Wyclef Jean In America* (Nicky Lolo) and *Everyday People* (Beadle).

Timothy Davis-Reed (The Policeman) is a Syracuse University Drama Professor and TV veteran known for his roles as Chris on *Sports Night* and as Mark O'Donnell on *The West Wing*; **Doug Eskew (Slow Drag)** last appeared at Syracuse Stage in *Ain't Misbehavin'*, and he appeared on Broadway in *Five Guys Named Moe* (Big Moe) and *Truly Blessed* (Reverend Dukes); **Kenny Morris (Irvin)** last appeared at Syracuse Stage as Meyer/Mikhl in *The Dubbuk*, and his Broadway credits include *Hairspray* and *Les Misérables*; **Cortez Nance (Cutler)** has appeared in a number of plays by August Wilson: *Gem of the Ocean* (Eli) and *Fences* (Gabriel) at Pittsburgh Public Theatre Company, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Slow Drag) at Swine Palace Theatre, *Jitney* (Doub) at Second Stage Theatre, *Seven Guitars* (Red Carter) at Alliance Theatre Company, and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (Seth) at Denver Center Theatre Company. **John Ottavino (Sturdyvant)** recently appeared in *Blackbird* at Manhattan

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Theatre Club and *The Poor Itch* at The Public Theatre, and he was directed by Edward Albee in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and Sam Shepard's *Hawk Moon*.

James F. Miller (Sylvester) is a senior Acting major in Syracuse University's Department of Drama. **Danielle Lenee' (Dussie Mae)** is a junior Acting major.

DESIGNERS

William Bloodgood (Scenic Designer) returns to Syracuse Stage for the first time since 1998; his work was previously seen in Syracuse Stage productions of *Broadway Bound* and *The Sisters Rosensweig*, and at Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland he has designed 150 productions. **Darren McCroom (Lighting Designer)** has been a designer for 26 years and his credits include Oregon Shakespeare Festival and Ford's Theatre in Washington D.C. **Helen Huang (Costume Designer)** has won a Helen Hayes for work and her designs were awarded with inclusion in the United States national Exhibit to the Prague Quadrennial 2007. **Jonathan Herter (Sound Designer)** is the resident Sound Designer at Syracuse Stage.

CHOREOGRAPHER & FIGHT CHOREOGRAPHER

Anthony Salatino recently choreographed the New York City Opera premiere of *Margaret Garner*, music by Richard Danielpour, libretto by Toni Morrison (based on her novel *Beloved*) and directed by Tazewell Thompson. A graduate of Juilliard School, he has choreographed for many opera and dance companies throughout the country, and he is an associate professor at Syracuse University's Department of Drama.

COMPOSER/MUSICAL DIRECTOR

Michael G. Keck has collaborated with Timothy Bond on *Death of a Salesman*, *Intimate Apparel*, *Jitney*, *Gem of the Ocean*, *Top Dog/Under Dog* and *The Piano Lesson*. Recently Mr. Keck was nominated for a Barrymore Award for *It Ain't Nothin' but the Blues* at the Prince Music Theatre in Philadelphia.

DIRECTOR

Timothy Bond is the new Producing Artistic Director of Syracuse Stage and the Syracuse University Department of Drama. He has more than 20 years experience in leading regional theatres throughout the country. Most recently, he served for 11 years as Associate Artistic Director of the famed Oregon Shakespeare Festival where he directed 12 productions, including works by Shakespeare, August Wilson, Suzan-Lori Parks, Edward Albee, Lorraine Hansberry, Lynn Nottage, Octavio Soliz and Pearl Cleage. Prior to that, Bond spent 13 years with the Seattle Group Theatre, serving as Artistic Director from 1991 - 1996. While there he directed more than twenty plays and oversaw the largest capital campaign in the company's history, culminating in the completion of a new theatre complex in the Seattle Center. Bond has also directed at such prestigious theatres as The Guthrie, Arena Stage, The Empty Space Theatre, A

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Contemporary Theatre, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre, Cleveland Play House and Indiana Repertory Theatre.

Bond holds a BFA from Howard University and an MFA (magna cum laude) from the University of Washington. He has served on the faculties of the University of Washington and University of Wisconsin (Lorraine Hansberry Professorship Award). He has been a guest director at Juilliard and Seattle's Cornish Institute. In addition, he taught master classes and was an adjudicator at the first and third annual Chinese Universities Shakespeare Festival, and taught classes in association with Seattle Children's Theatre, Seattle Repertory Theatre, and Howard University, among others. Bond has also served on the Board of Directors of the Theatre Communications Group from 1993 - 1997 and ASSITEJ, the United States Center for the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People, a national service organization promoting the power of professional theatre for young audiences, from 2001 - 2003.

PLAYWRIGHT

August Wilson authored *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Seven Guitars*, *Fences*, *Two Trains Running*, *Jitney*, *King Hedley II*, and *Radio Golf*. These works explore the heritage and experience of African-Americans, decade-by-decade, over the course of the twentieth century. Mr. Wilson's works garnered many awards including Pulitzer Prizes for *Fences* (1987); and for *The Piano Lesson* (1990); a Tony Award for *Fences*; Great Britain's Olivier Award for *Jitney*; as well as eight New York Drama Critics Circle Awards for *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Fences*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Two Trains Running*, *Seven Guitars*, *Jitney*, and *Radio Golf*. Additionally, the cast recording of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* received a 1985 Grammy Award, and Mr. Wilson received a 1995 Emmy Award nomination for his screenplay adaptation of *The Piano Lesson*. Mr. Wilson's early works included the one-act plays *The Janitor*, *Recycle*, *The Coldest Day of the Year*, *Malcolm X*, *The Homecoming* and the musical satire *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*.

TICKETS

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom will run September 9-October 4, 2008. Tickets are now on sale, ranging \$15-\$48, with discounts for seniors and students. Rush tickets available two hours prior to curtain. 6 play season subscriptions and Flex 6 Packs are also now on sale. Tickets can be purchased in person at the Syracuse Stage Box Office at 820 East Genesee Street, by telephone at 315-443-3275, or online at SyracuseStage.org. For Group Discounts call 315-443-9844.

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Fact Sheet:

Timothy Bond's Directing Debut

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

By August Wilson

Directed by Timothy Bond

Musical Direction and Compositions by Michael G. Keck
Choreography and Fight Choreography by Anthony Salatino

Dates: September 9-October 4, 2008

Previews: September 9-11

Opening weekend: September 12-13

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Exclusive Sponsor:

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Syracuse Stage Season Sponsors:

The Post-Standard

Time Warner Cable

Scenic Design: William Bloodgood

Costume Design: Helen Huang

Lighting Design: Darren McCroom

Sound Design: Jonathan Herter

Stage Manager: **Stuart Plymesser**

Cast:

Thomas Jefferson Byrd (Toledo)

Timothy Davis-Reed (The Policeman)

Doug Eskew (Slow Drag)

Ebony Jo-Ann (Ma Rainey)

Danielle Lenee' (Dussie Mae)

James F. Miller (Sylvester)

Warner Miller (Levee)

Kenny Morris (Irvin)

Cortez Nance (Cutler)

John Ottavino (Sturdyvant)

The names in bold are actors and stage managers who are members of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers in the United States.

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Tickets range \$15-\$48

Previews: \$24-\$31

Sun-Thurs evenings: \$24-36

Wed, Sat & Sun matinees: \$24-\$41

Fri & Sat evenings: \$24-\$45

Opening night: \$24-\$48

Rush tickets: \$15-\$25 (available two hours prior to curtain)

*Discounts available for seniors and students

Box Office: 315-443-3275

Online: www.SyracuseStage.org

Group Tickets: 315-443-9844

Show Calendar: September/October

SUN	MON	TUES	WED	THURS	FRI	SAT
7	8	9	10	11	12	13
		7:30 P	7:30 P	7:30 P	8:00	8:30 O
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
2:00 D			7:30	7:30	8:00	3:00
21	22	23	24	25	26	27
2:00 7:00 D			2:00 D	10:30 7:30	8:00	3:00 8:00
28	29	30	1	2	3	4
2:00		7:30 S	10:30 7:30	10:30 7:30	8:00	3:00 8:00

P=Preview O=Opening D=Discussion S=Signed

*10:30 a.m. performances are for students only

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Syracuse Stage, 820 E. Genesee Street, Box Office: 315-443-3275, SyracuseStage.org
Producing Artistic Director: Timothy Bond, Managing Director: Jeffrey Woodward