

# 'Ma Rainey' hits all the right notes

BY KATHY L. GREENBERG

Special correspondent

ST. PETERSBURG — American Stage Theatre Company won the trifecta with their production of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." Writing, directing, acting: each of these elements proved outstanding at Sunday's matinee.

Playwright August Wilson wrote "Ma Rainey" in 1982. Part of his Century Cycle, which includes 10 plays set in each decade of the 20th century, "Ma Rainey" takes place in 1927 Chicago. It is the only play in Wilson's series not situated in Pittsburgh's Hill District, where Wilson grew up.

The Mother of the Blues and her song "Black Bottom" served as Wilson's inspiration. He invented four black musicians — Cutler, Toledo, Slow Drag and Levee — who are ex-

## 'MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM'

Theater review

**When:** Through Feb. 13; 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday, 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday

**Where:** American Stage Theatre Company at the Raymond James Theatre, 163 Third St. N., St. Petersburg; call (727) 823-7529 or visit [www.americanstage.org](http://www.americanstage.org)

**Cost:** \$29-\$50, depending on date and time of performance

**Running time:** 135 minutes

pecting Ma Rainey (Sharon E. Scott) at a recording studio, ready to cut a new blues album.

While waiting, the four men philosophize, bicker, light up a few doobies and grumble about everything from shoes to farming. When Ma finally arrives, she brings with her a duffle bag of demands.

Despite so much talent in one place, the pall of racism and various forms of inequality nearly suffocate the personalities in the room.

Wilson intuited and crafted some of the most

genuine, egocentric characters in theater. It isn't just the realistic dialogue that elevates the players; Wilson's personalization of each individual reaches near-genius levels. Freud and Jung would have envied the playwright's preternatural gift for masticating psychology and spitting out such a fascinating assortment of psyches.

Cutler (Alan Bomar Jones) leads the band but knows his place. He avoids trouble and has no patience for fool rebels like Levee (Ben Cain).

Levee dreams big and



AMERICAN STAGE THEATRE COMPANY

**Sharon E. Scott plays the title role in American Stage's production of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."**

talks even bigger. He violently denies his place in a racist society, figuring the more he defies, the farther he'll go. But his ego only masks deep-seated insecurities, rage and volatility, and ultimately destroys

him.

Toledo (Kim Sullivan) intellectualizes the present with history, philosophy and wisdom. He's kind of the Jiminy Cricket on keyboard. And Slow Drag (Ron Bobb-Semple) —

he's just grateful for the work, as easy-going as his name implies.

Mark Clayton Southers beautifully directed this production. As the new artistic director for Theater Initiatives at the August Wilson Center for African American Culture, he brought texture and meaning to Wilson's vision.

The extraordinary ensemble cast — which also included Brandii, Bill Karnovsky, Gregory "Rico" Parker, Joe Parra and Stephen Ray — surpassed the potential of Wilson's words. But if pushed to point out the most riveting performance, it would be Cain's.

The cherry on top of this soulful treat was the music itself. Bold and brassy, there's nothing like the blues to chase away the mean reds.