

VARIETY

GEORGE C. WOLFE'S FILM ADAPTION
OF "MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM"

GRIPS AUDIENCES

MAKING AN IMPACT ACROSS DECADES AND MEDIUMS.

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The loud hum of anticipatory buzz around George C. Wolfe's film adaptation of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" has been building in the months up to its December release on Netflix, and for good reason. The story, portraying gut wrenching themes of the Black American experience, is begging to be told in a year defined by horrendous crimes against BIPOC communities. On top of that, the tragic passing of one of the film's leads, Chadwick Boseman, back in August, left millions of fans devastated. Boseman gave an Oscar-worthy performance as the hot headed trumpeter Levee in the 2020 film, his last role.

August Wilson's play of the same title serves as the source material for the film, and was originally part of a ten play collection by Wilson on the Black American experience. "Fences" is also a part of this collection, earning its own highly praised film adaptation a few years back that was also produced by Denzel Washington, who has hopes to adapt all of Wilson's century cycle plays into films. However, there is risk in adapting stage plays into fully produced films. Sometimes the dramatic action doesn't translate well, with dialogue feeling overdramatic, scene breaks feeling abrupt, and the world of the story feeling underwhelming.

George C. Wolfe took the risk with this adaptation, and it paid off. "Ma Rainey" soars with a well adapted screenplay by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, and an ensemble of powerhouse performances led by Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman.

The film takes place in a sweltering Chicago recording studio in the summer of 1927. Revered blues singer Ma Rainey (Viola Davis) is set to record another hit under her contract with two white music executives. While they wait for their leading lady, the band is left to their own devices arguing about music and life in a practice room. The sharply written dialogue makes the rising tensions and temperatures in the group gripping, particularly between the more seasoned musician Cutler (Coleman Domingo), and the hot headed trumpeter Levee (Chadwick Boseman), who is determined to do things his own way. While Levee's ego builds, Ma Rainey arrives with her entourage in tow, dominating the studio and adding to the already rising tensions. When heads and opinions start to clash, particularly between Ma Rainey and the executives, the action in the studio reaches a boiling point. With a devastating ending, the audience is left with a powerful image of the toxic domination of white power over black artists, their stories, and their voices.

The film makes a smooth departure from the play's intended medium, while upholding the story's foundation. The bouncing and building dialogue still oozes with theatricality, and the story moves swiftly despite all the action taking place in one location. The production design (by Mark Ricker) creates a detailed world of 1927 Chicago, immersing the audience in the space, as you would be in a theatre. The script cuts out an hour of dialogue from the play, which helps tremendously with the pacing of the film. That pacing comes at the price of character development, however, for supporting roles like band members Toledo (Glynn Turman) and Slow Drag (Michael Potts).

Character development was surely not lost on the film's primary powerhouses, Davis and Boseman. The character driven narrative of Ma Rainey puts a greater focus on the performances, and they delivered. Academy Award winner Viola Davis brings Ma Rainey down to earth, revealing a clear ownership of her talents while facing the heartbreaking truths of life as a black artist in America. Davis' moments in the studio are unparalleled in the film, possibly only by Boseman's emotional rollercoaster as Levee. Boseman takes the audience to the highest highs with musings about starting his own band, then down to the lowest lows as he recounts traumas of racism that have permeated his family for generations. It's tragically beautiful to watch his performance, his portrayal of the vast emotional range experienced by Levee throughout the film grips the audience from the start and doesn't let go until the credits roll. While the rest of the ensemble, like Ma Rainey's nephew Sylvester (Dusan Brown) and girlfriend Dussie Mae (Taylour Paige), leave a mark on the story, the film belongs to Davis and Boseman, who are destined for Oscar nods.

With Wolfe's thoughtful direction, August Wilson's decades old story flows beautifully into contemporary film. The story of Ma Rainey and her band still resonates deeply across decades and mediums in America. The film is destined for awards this season, and speaks volumes about our society then and today.



Writer's Memo

1. I feel the strengths of my review lie in my context of the film. I feel that I give a good description on the background leading up to the production of the film, as well as the story so if a reader hadn't seen the film, they would still understand the review.
2. The revisions I made were heavily around my evaluation on the film. I worked on making it clear that this review was a positive one, and that my references to the play were contextualized and supported my stance. Additionally, I worked on my transitions and paragraph divisions to cultivate a better flow.
3. I am still concerned if my ideas flow well throughout the piece, and if my evaluation is clear and appropriately woven in, even in the portions where I am primarily giving context.
4. I think I addresses my target publication well through the amount of context I gave in the review, so even if someone does not typically read film reviews through *Variety* they will still understand the overall topic of the piece and enjoy it! I am sure I can still go further, so I would love feedback on this specifically.
5. I would like you to know that I worked particularly on making my comments relating back to the play clear and supportive of my stance! I would love to have your feedback on if the balance between focusing on the film while still mentioning the play as source material was clear and helped my specific lens on the review. Thanks!