

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom

by Rev. Dr. Robin Hawley Gorsline

Sometimes, when feeling weighed down by an ever-present burden of living in a less than welcoming world, we need to stand up and say, to ourselves and to others, "No, No, No!" A small example in my life was my insistence in referring to Jonathan as my husband, many years before marriage equality was law.

I thought of this as Jonathan and I watched the new Netflix film, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom." I love Blues music and have long been a fan of Bessie Smith. However, I never paid enough attention to Ma Rainey. As wonderful as Bessie is, now I am realizing what I have been missing.

She is the central character in the film (and in the play by August Wilson on which it is based), but there also are four Black musicians and two white men who own and operate the recording studio where the action takes place.

After watching, we discussed the reality that we don't learn very much about Ma Rainey; there are few autobiographical details. Big chunks of the film involve the male characters. The banter among the band members is rich and worth the price of admission alone (Chad Bozeman's performance is breathtaking in its power and authenticity), but Viola Davis as Ma is on fire as well. And we learn she has a young female lover. I did not know that about her.

In the demands she makes of the other characters, her take no prisoners attitude toward what she does not wish to do and insisting on what she wants, one could see the stereotypical 'difficult artist.'

But as I have kept pondering the choices made by August Wilson and the filmmakers I realize that we are given the opportunity to see how one extraordinarily gifted Black female musician copes with the racism and misogyny that is all around her, pushing at her to be less than she is, to give in for the convenience and ease of White, and Black, men.

As A.O Scott wrote in The New York Times, "It's the best way she has found of protecting the value of her gift, which once it becomes a commodity—a record—will enrich somebody else. The hard bargain she drives is the best deal she can get."

As we ponder the theme of learning to move in the dark, Ma Rainey shows us that sometimes in the face of overwhelming odds, a line must be drawn in order to be true to oneself.

I admit that in my white male privilege I have not ever had to face this level of negativity, but I understand more about why others who have, and still do, insist on their dignity, their lives, and define and honor their own souls by living in the way true to themselves, their souls.

Ma Rainey encourages all of us to affirm, live, and celebrate our own truths, no matter what The Man (whoever that may be for us) says.

You can watch the trailer for the film here, and get a sense of the power of Ma Rainey (and others) as they sing and speak their Black truths in the White



man's recording world.