

# A harsh history lesson in 'Ma Rainey'

I recently had the pleasure of ushering at a student matinee of "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" at Actors Theatre of Louisville. When I told my mom I was volunteering at a performance in which the audience is composed almost entirely of middle- and high school students, she asked if I was sure about that. She had read the play after seeing an overview of it in the Sunday paper, and she couldn't imagine that youngsters would be attending.

I, too, had read the overview before seeing it, and that was enough to make me wonder if university theater programs ever arranged student matinees. After all, what high school in Kentucky, even in Louisville, would take students to see a play about a bisexual blues singer? My curiosity was so piqued that when

light snow resulted in school cancellations, and therefore the cancellation of the performance, I immediately volunteered to usher at the student matinee scheduled for the next day.

The audience surprised me. Children from a middle school and three high schools plus their chaperones and a few adult visitors from other institutions watched the play that day, and most were riveted. Once the middle-schoolers got over their giggles

at seeing two of the characters kiss, openly caress and essentially dry hump one another live in front of them, they were quiet. None of the students seemed to get the joke in the play about The Lord's Prayer, but I don't recall any inappropriate laughter, either, and when I should have been able to hear a pin drop, I could have.

My slight disappointment in the audience came after the show, when one of the high schools stayed to have a question-and-answer session with the cast. Most of the questions were the same ones I've heard adults ask, but then one girl asked the actor playing Levee why his character was so angry.

"Seriously?" I thought to myself. I wanted to ask her if she was asleep during that entire monologue in which he describes how white men from his town stormed into his house one night while his dad was away and gang raped his mother in front of him,

then stabbed him — an 8-year-old boy trying to defend his mom with his dad's hunting knife. I wondered if she had been listening when Levee recounted how his father ended up getting lynched when he sought revenge.

When I thought about it more later, I concluded she hadn't missed that part of August Wilson's classic play. From the audience's silence, I gathered the students were able to understand the relatively euphemistic terms used to describe gang rape. I had wondered, however, if they were able to process it as violence, sexual assault as a weapon of war against blacks who dared to think they could have the same lifestyle whites had in the 1890s and early 1900s. I gathered from the girl's question that the answer to my own question is "No."

Although I had high hopes, I guess I shouldn't have had high expectations. We don't talk about American

history's truly ugly parts very often. And I'm sure the students had seen violence and heard harsh language before entering the theater that day, but how often do they see it not as entertainment, but within a story that could be real and that's about what prolonged oppression can do to a person's spirit?

I didn't expect teens to verbalize the context the way I did, but the girl's question made me realize that while kids are exposed to adult themes, they don't always process the magnitude of the actions they see the way adults do. That's why discussion is good and why I'm glad the theater exposed them to a bold and stark look at the past. ♣

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