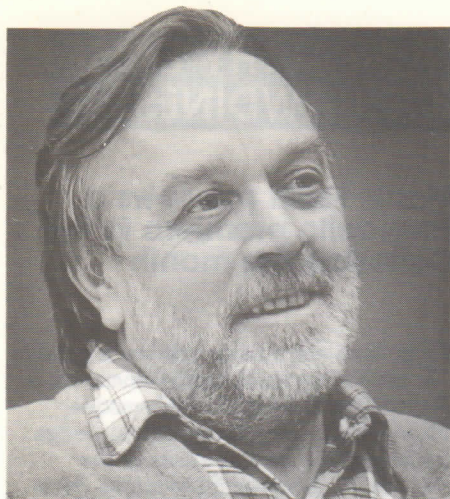


## LEARNING FROM THE BLUES



Bill Gaskill who is returning to the National to direct *Man, Beast and Virtue*

the bedroom door in the face of his frustrated spouse.

Yet, when the lady gets pregnant and the husband is about to appear again for a single night at home, how can her reputation for virtue be preserved? Only by making sure that this time the door will not be shut in her face, so that the pregnancy might still appear legitimate. That is the problem faced by Paolino and his lady in this play. How can the lover find the means of forcing the husband to make love to his wife this very night? A very Rabelaisian or Boccaccian situation. And Pirandello treats it with the broadest strokes of farce.

Yet, of course, the intellectual cannot quite escape the deeper meanings. If the husband here is the beast of the title and the wife the personification of bourgeois virtue, then Paolino, the studious young intellectual and Latin-tutor, must stand for 'Man' himself — weak, fallible and forced to do the very thing that is most repugnant to him — having to do all he can to get his mistress into bed with her bestial husband, merely because — in Italy a country then that outlawed divorce — there was no other way to 'preserve her virtue' and save her from utter disgrace and himself from total ruin.

Earthiness does not preclude intellectual appeal. On the contrary: was not Shakespeare as bawdy as he was philosophical? Pirandello was a Sicilian deeply imbued with the earthy folk humour of that, in many ways, very primitive island, more North African than Italian in many of its aspects. He wrote quite a number of Sicilian dialect folk plays in the spirit of the island.

And, indeed, it might well be argued that a healthy dose of bawdiness, earthiness and sensuality, is the foundation even of the intellectual heights reached by all the greatest playwrights: it is from the earth and its manure that the most esoteric and ethereal blooms must grow. And a sense of humour is the foundation of all true wisdom.

Gerard Raymond talks to the celebrated black American playwright, August Wilson, who makes his British debut at the National this autumn with Howard Davies' production of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* the first of a sequence of seven plays dealing with the black experience in 20th century America.

**W**hite folks don't understand about the blues. They hear it come out but they don't know how it got there. They don't understand that's life's way of talking. You don't sing to feel better. You sing cause that's a way of understanding life . . . ' says Ma Rainey in the play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which opens next month in the Cottesloe.

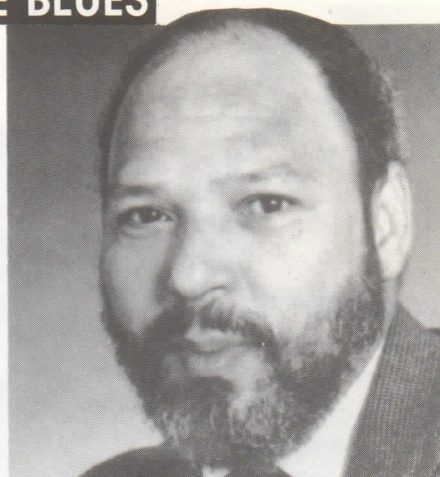
For the playwright, August Wilson, the blues are the primary influence in his work. 'Most of anything I do stems from the blues. It is a record of the cultural ideas of black America; their response to the world that they found themselves in. If you knew nothing about the people you will be able to listen to the music and determine their grace, their ideas of pleasure and pain, their social organization, their mythology and even their eating habits.

'We came out of an oral tradition. In order to keep certain information alive, you tell a story so that the person who hears it will go off and tell someone else. And one of the ways to do this was to put the information in a song. The music provides you with an emotional reference and as long as the people sing the song the information is kept alive.'

Wilson, who is a collector of old 78 rpm records, traces his discovery of the importance of the blues to a pirated recording of 'Nobody in Town Can Bake a Sweet Jelly Roll Like Mine' by the great Bessie Smith. 'From Bessie I learned that as black Americans we all had a song that was within us. You have everything that you need to exist in the world if you have your song, if you have your culture.'

Born in 1945 in an impoverished black community in Pittsburgh, Wilson began his career as a poet. He did not write any plays until the late seventies, although in 1968 he founded a theatre company which produced militant black plays. He started writing plays when he realised that he needed a larger canvas — the dramatic form — to tell his stories of the black experience in America.

'Black Americans have one of the most dramatic stories of all mankind to



August Wilson — 'Most of what I do stems from the blues'

tell when you consider our history in the Western world. It is 1989 and we are still here. We have been on the shores of North America since the middle part of the seventeenth century and have been through many, many, hardships, brutalities and attempts to destroy our culture and yet it remains today as vital and as fully alive as it was then.'

When Wilson completed *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, which is set in the 20s and takes its title from a black clog dance of the era, he decided on an ambitious plan: 'to look at, what to my mind, is the largest idea that confronted blacks of a particular decade and try to write a play for each decade illuminating those ideas and questioning those ideas and the validity of them to us in the 1980s.' He had previously written *Jitney*, set in the 70s and *Fullton Street*, which takes place in the 40s.

Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey's brief career as a recording artist lasted from 1923-1928 and was less successful than that of Bessie Smith. The play takes place in a recording studio in Chicago where Ma, the 'Mother of the Blues', is about to cut a record for Paramount, a white-owned company. 'In the play, I look at the economic exploitation of the early black performers. I thought music was one thing that we have created on the continent and if we had been able to control that we would have a much different economic base today in America than we do. Then I thought that I would show the content of the lives of the people — to show where this music comes from.'

*Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* opened on Broadway in 1984 and immediately established Wilson as one of America's major playwrights. The play was directed by Lloyd Richards who had first come across the work two years previously at the National Playwright's Conference at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Centre in Connecticut. Richards, who is artistic director of the Conference, said: 'I picked up that



script and it immediately connected. It transported me back to life. It was true . . . the things the characters talk about. The cadences. The music of life . . . I knew I had to do it.' He gave the play its premiere at the Yale Repertory Theatre, where he is artistic director as well.

Since then Richards has directed all Wilson's plays, producing them first at Yale, then touring through various regional theatres in the US before opening on Broadway. *Fences*, which is set in the 1950s, won Wilson the Pulitzer Prize, the Tony and every other major Best Play award in 1987. The following year *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, which takes place in 1911, was critically acclaimed in New York. Spring next year will bring *The Piano Lesson* (set in the 30s) to Broadway and will mark the premiere of Wilson's latest work, *Two Trains Running*, a 1960s drama, at Yale.



Theresa Merritt as Gertrude 'Ma' Rainey in the New York production. Photo: Bert Andrews

Wilson doesn't do any specific historical research for his seventh decade play project. 'The only things I knew about Ma Rainey were the liner notes on a record album. I thought the best way to know her would be to listen to her music. The story about the recording date and the studio, I invented all of that. I was happy to find out that she actually had a sister after I had I given her a nephew and refer to her sister in the play. For me to do research is like putting on a straight-jacket.'

Five years after its New York premiere, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* will become the first August Wilson play to be presented outside the U.S. 'I hope it will speak to everyone. As black people in America and throughout the world continue to debate the character of their culture, I simply offer the play as part of that debate. The largest idea can be contained by black life. It is charged and luminous and has all the qualities of anyone else's life. I think a lot of this is hidden by the glancing manner in which white America looks at blacks, and the way blacks look at themselves.'

## THE AUSTRALIAN CONNECTION

### Sydney-born Leo McKern talks to Gordon Gow about *Boswell for the Defence* opening this month at The Playhouse

Acting, as Leo McKern defines it, is 'a passionately private activity which one hopes will be noticed. It's immensely satisfactory because you can show off and hide at the same time. You are hiding behind the character you play, while at the same time you're behaving in public in a way that ordinarily you wouldn't dare to do.'

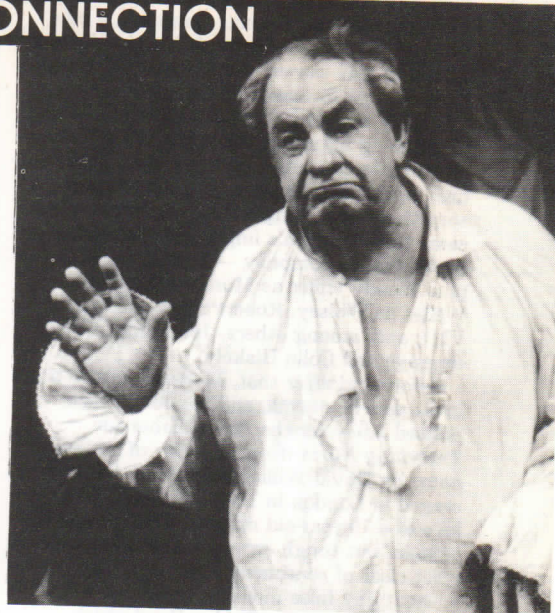
The definition is especially apt in respect of his current endeavour as the sole performer in *Boswell for the Defence* which begins its London run at the Playhouse in Northumberland Avenue on September 6. He prefers to describe it as a play rather than a one man show.

'It isn't a compilation of extracts from the classics or whatever. The script was sent to me and I hadn't read much more than three pages before I knew it would be worth my while to read the rest of it. I always read any material I'm sent. I sit down immediately and always at one sitting, and then decide whether it's worth doing, or should be done — a subtly different thing. The writer Patrick Edgeworth is an Englishman who has lived for about 20 years in Australia, and this play has a fascinating link with Australia. When I glanced first at Patrick's list of credits and saw that he'd written a great deal of episodic television, I didn't expect a great deal. And then I was astonished. It's a profoundly good thing. It has a high polish, a brilliance. If the sun struck it we'd be blinded — like the shield of Thingamejig.'

The Australian connection in *Boswell for the Defence* stems from the efforts of the eighteenth-century writer and lawyer to save the life of the convict Mary Broad who had made a remarkable escape from the antipodean penal colony but had been recaptured, returned to England, and condemned to death. Mary Broad is the same person as Mary 'Dabbie' Bryant (her married name) who figures in Thomas Keneally's fine novel *The Playmaker* and the play derived from it by Timberlake Wertenbaker, *Our Country's Good*, which has been staged so notably by Max Stafford-Clark at the Royal Court.

*Boswell for the Defence* had its initial airings in Australia earlier this year: five weeks at the 800-seat Playhouse of the Arts Centre in Melbourne, followed by three weeks in Perth. (McKern, who has an antipathy to air travel, made the great journey across the Nullabor Plain by rail, which takes two days and a night, occupying himself for part of that time by driving the train: 'A simple matter, keeping it at a steady 100 kilometres an hour; it's only a throttle, and you have to press a button every couple of minutes, otherwise the brakes go on automatically — the Dead Man's Hand.')

I talked with McKern in the spacious lounge-cum-dining room of a suite in the Grafton Hotel in Tottenham Court Road, just around the corner from the rehearsal hall where he and director Frank Hauser were refreshing *Boswell* for its London



Leo McKern as *Boswell* at the Playhouse

opening. The accommodation, he told me, was by courtesy of the play's management; his producer, Malcolm Cooke, will be moving him to the Savoy for his season at the Playhouse. All this he considers highly gratifying, as well he might; but then, thanks in no small measure to his television fame as John Mortimer's delightful *Rumpole*, McKern, well into his sixties, is a solid success.

He was born in 1920, in Sydney. After army service in the Second World War he came to England in 1946, acted in rep and then at the Old Vic and Stratford-upon-Avon. 'I played parts as disparate as Feste and Iago, Touchstone and Northumberland and Glendower. Marvellous. An immense range of wonderful stuff. Chalk and cheese. Spice of life.'

In the West End in 1958, he was Big Daddy in the first London production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* by Tennessee Williams, at the Comedy, with Kim Stanley as Maggie and Paul Massie as Brick, directed by Peter Hall. At that time the Lord Chamberlain still held sway as censor, and to circumvent his ban on *Cat* it was presented under 'club' conditions: the censorship was reckoned to be due as much to its references to cancer as to its rather discreet homosexual element.

McKern contributed importantly, as well, to the first production of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, at the Globe in 1960, playing the Common Man to Scofield's Thomas More, directed by Noel Willman. The Common Man commented wittily upon the historical events, and also assumed a number of incidental characters. His need to establish a particular rapport with the audience is echoed now to some extent by McKern's solo portrayal of Boswell.

'There is a bridge to cross, and it's extremely dangerous. The Common Man is a raconteur. His function is to inform the audience as to what is happening and why. The mounting of *A Man for All Seasons* is, in fact, stylized, unlike the film version which had to be made naturalistically. No way of treating the film in the way you treated the play. In the theatre it's quite obvious that the play is a play, not a realistic experience.'

For the film, adapted by Bolt and directed by Fred Zinnemann in 1966, the Common