

Viola Davis On Playing the Powerful Ma Rainey: 'She Was Unapologetic In Her Sexuality'

[Adrienne Samuels Gibbs](#)

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First Look: Davis talks about Ma Rainey's swagger and Chadwick Boseman's last role



Viola Davis talks to ZORA about Ma Rainey for the Netflix adaptation of the August Wilson play, directed by George C. Wolfe and starring Chadwick Boseman. Photos: David Lee/Netflix

ZORA's exclusive *First Look at the film adaptation of August Wilson's 1984 play, Ma Rainey's Black Bottom, which will be released on Netflix December 18, 2020.*

When we first see the Mother of the Blues in Netflix's new adaptation of *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, she is swinging her thick hips, breasts spill out of her dress, her gold front teeth glisten and the prim and proper audience salivates as they sit on their makeshift box stools and sway to the sexy music. It's hot. It's dark. And Ma, as they call her, is an unapologetically powerful Black woman harnessing brains, brawn, and boobs to get to the top of the charts while retaining ownership of her image and rights to her music during the era of Jim Crow.

Fans of the original August Wilson play know the storyline, but the additional beauty of this version is that a Broadway-quality Wilson production is available to anyone with a phone or a television set. It also doesn't hurt that Viola Davis stars as the master negotiator Ma while Chadwick Boseman stars opposite her as the horn-playing, authority-jiving Levee, in the *Black Panther* star's last film role prior to his untimely death. Venerable playwright George C. Wolfe directs this who's who of Black art and Black history, which streams in December and largely takes place inside of a recording session in Chicago.

"Usually Ma Rainey and how she looks has been greatly stereotyped in cinematic history and in life," says Davis,

explaining her approach to the character. "The Black woman is always dark, fat, funny, can sing, and is really not sexualized in any way that is dangerous. But that's not my understanding of women like that. Ma is my Auntie Joyce, my Aunt Letha, who were highly sexual and the most beautiful women I ever seen in my life. They were stylish."



Knowing thick women who embraced their voluptuous beauty helped Davis to craft her own character. She gained weight for the role, getting close to 200 pounds.

"I didn't want [Ma] to physically look like she was apologizing for herself. I wanted her to switch. If those breasts were hanging out like that? They just hung out. She was unapologetic about her sexuality. I just feel like in playing her, I had to honor that."

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Though she was married to a man, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey dated women. In the film, the character Dussie Mae is her “dare I say, ‘side piece,’” explains Davis. The relationship is subtle on screen, yet effective. It also worked its way into Ma’s music. “I don’t care how uncomfortable people feel with bisexuality, Ma Rainey was bisexual,” she says, pointing to the song ‘Prove it on Me’ which is about women.

Ma’s swagger on-screen is key to understanding her music and her position in history. Meanwhile, the film honors both Ma and Wilson despite deviating slightly from the original play. One major change? The Netflix version takes place in summertime Chicago, as opposed to winter. Despite the heat, Ma still wears a fur stole in the recording studio. Status, baby.

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“It’s very important to have respect without reverence, you understand what I’m saying?” says Wolfe, who has two Tony Awards and 12 Tony nominations. “I gave myself

permission to do that because otherwise too much reverence can get stuffy... Art either grows or it dies. This play is during the winter and what happens if we set it during the summer? In the South, the land absorbs the heat. But in the North, the body absorbs the heat and it can make people go through all kinds of moods and attitudes if it were hot and you gave yourself permission."

Ma — *and* Boseman's Levee — most definitely give themselves permission to uh, act out, in this flick.

Remarkably, both Wolfe and Davis say, Boseman gave no indication that he was fighting cancer while filming a very physical role. He lost weight, they say, but that alone is no cause for alarm in Hollywood.

"He was thinner but I thought, you know, actors they fast, they do all these things," says Wolfe. "I also thought he was shedding some of the *Black Panther* facade. And the *leanness* and that kind of leanness worked very well for Levee."

Davis says Boseman leaned into the role and worked for the joy of working.

"He was not chasing the green, not chasing the money, just chasing the work," she says, remembering their conversations. "He has a willingness to let go of ego and almost an insistence to leave Chadwick Boseman at the door and leave that *Black Panther*-making-a-billion-dollars at the door."



But hindsight is 20/20.

"He was extremely tired, but there's a lot of tired people in the business — especially people in his position," says Davis. "In hindsight, I noticed all the wonderful people he surrounded himself with were always praying over him and meditating over him and I thought that was part of what he demanded or [how he] created that sacred space. I didn't know they were just trying to pour life and energy into him."

"He would just fall asleep standing up, but boy, when that camera rolled? You didn't see any of it."

Boseman's character Levee has a pivotal scene where he questions God, and it's such a visceral and understandable diatribe. It's also rarely seen on screen,

as Black people are typically portrayed as hyper-religious to a fault or to a funny. But, says Davis, that's the magic of August Wilson's writing.

In prepping for the role, Davis listened to Rainey's repertoire, studied her images, and reviewed the legacy that included Rainey being laser aware that once she signed over her music and sound, it could be co-opted by the White-run music industry.

"In acting, they say study life," says Davis, who connected with this role in a very real way. "If you don't like what you're studying, then don't play it. One of the things with Ma that I learned is that, yes, she gave a lot of people opportunity, including Bessie Smith. She was very generous. When she was performing she would tell her bandmates that they couldn't cuss — not while we're in performance. We got to be God-fearing and all that. At the same time, she'd be beating up 200-pound men in bars and going to orgies."

"If she asks anybody permission they're gonna say no, so don't ask. Just charge into the room..."— George C. Wolfe

"Once again, that's what I grew up with. In church on Sunday folk and by Monday morning, they were drinking moonshine and messing with someone's husband or wife."

Wolfe describes Rainey more bluntly, although with a

chuckle: "Thug. She was a thug. I was like, 'Oh she just is unapologetic.' Not asking anybody's permission. If she asks anybody permission they're gonna say no, so don't ask. Just charge into the room, going, 'I am here.'"

Davis enjoyed Rainey because she ignored trends. She stood up for her music and her taste and didn't bend even when producers said they wanted a new sound.

"She was a person who followed her heart, not what was in fashion," says Davis. "Everybody is trying to be the quote unquote boss bitch — the person better than that person on top — and you never quite know who they are. That to me is what stands out about Ma; she *knows* her worth and value."

And to think, the Academy Award-winning Davis almost didn't think she was the right fit.

"Finally, I just asked myself that question: Why *not* me? You know? And from there on I just embraced the role," she says.

Davis was also shooting the end of *How To Get Away With Murder* while working on the film. Though it takes place in Chicago, the set was in Pittsburgh, which, Wolfe says, provided "a little social realism there" to help everyone remember 1927.

Rainey's life was complicated in that she commanded power in the South and scared White folks in the North

while negotiating contracts like she went to Harvard law. She openly loved women — clearly seen in poignant parts of this film. The multitudes within Rainey will draw in audiences much like it drew in Davis.

"What I loved about her, what is really in short supply now, is her authenticity," says Davis, who kind of falls into character just for a moment. "And that may seem really small but she even says it in the movie, she says, 'Ma listen to her own heart, Ma don't listen to *nobody* else.'"