

MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM AT THE NATIONAL

By Valerie Tomlin

I must confess that, when I initially saw the words 'black bottom' on the London Underground poster, I felt a mild discomfort. In the pit of my stomach I had conjured up stereotypical images associated with the African body shape: the dehumanising story of Sarah Baartman who was disparagingly called the 'Hottentot Venus'. Exhibited by her British owners as an 'exotic' beauty, and wearing only beads and feathers hung around her waist, Sarah was described as having gyrating buttocks. She was paraded naked in a cage as an 18th century 'freak of nature'.

In fact, this play is not about body image but about a dance craze that swept America and later Britain in the 1920s. The *Black Bottom* was a dance, originally developed by African Americans in the South as early as 1907, which combined features derived from the aesthetics of African dance, notably syncopated rhythms, bent knees, crouched torso and shoulder, hip and pelvic movement. Soon the craze was for fast-paced, energetic dances like the Black Bottom, the Charleston and the Lindy Hop, which grew with the music of the Jazz Age. These dances contrasted starkly with the artistic qualities of classical ballroom dances like the Viennese Waltz or the Quick Step, characterised by long, flowing, gliding movements.

This period developed into the Roaring Twenties, sandwiched between World War I and the 1930's financial crash. Britain had emerged from 'the war to end all wars' after losing millions of lives and its Empire. Its Victorian confidence was shattered. The rebuilding process heralded many political, technological and social changes. It was a period of bohemian creativity. European artists and like Paul Gauguin, Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse yearned for a simpler, idyllic lifestyle in contrast to the mechanistic violence of World War I. Traditional African sculptures became a powerful influence among European artists, stimulating an appetite for exotic images of African culture. This was captured by Paul Collins' paintings of the American expatriate in Paris – the performance artist Josephine Baker. Despite her sophisticated hairstyle, the slicked back Marcel finger waves, she still fulfilled European fantasies and sexual desires for the exotic, primitive African woman.

Josephine Baker symbolised the celebrated Jazz Age in Europe; it became a new art form that provided an optimistic space. People could enjoy new dances, release pent up emotions and escape from the restrictive lifestyles imposed by the war. In America, downtown residents of New York were soon seen travelling uptown to patronise the Harlem clubs. For them the 'Negro' was chic. The 'primitivised' African moves they saw on 'sexual' black bodies would not be acceptable popular American culture, they could only be acceptable

on the bodies of white dancers. There was still a negative association between race and the body beautiful. So jazz dances like the Shimmy, the Charleston and the *Black Bottom* were marketed to the wider American public as Ann Pennington's *Black Bottom* and Gilda Gray's Shimmy – not as Josephine Baker's or Ma Rainey's *Black Bottom*.

In 1926 the process was complete, when Broadway production performed a modified version of the *Black Bottom*, it became a national craze in America and across the world. Jazz dances now incorporated into mainstream American culture had originally flowed from an outpouring of confidence into the rebirth and re-invention of traditional African cultures, at the time when millions of African Americans made the 'Great Migration' from the savannahs of the rural south to the northern cities. The long standing efforts to suppress African culture, customs and traditions that were seen as primitive - were now unleashed. From the womb of the enslaved, came a new Renaissance of the African heritage. The Jazz Age was born.

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" by August Wilson charts the experience of African Americans in the 20th century and runs until the 18 May 2016 at the National Theatre, South Bank.

Reference: *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920's* (2000) by Petrine Archer-Straw