


**EMINENT
WILSONIAN**

Wide-ranging as an actor, Brandon J. Dirden has a deep affinity for August Wilson, whose plays “are never about a single person, always about a community.”

A Timeless Cautionary Tale

IT WOULD BE EASY, Brandon J. Dirden admits, to reduce Levee—the ill-fated young trumpeter he plays in August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*—“to a loose cannon with anger management issues.” But that would overlook what Dirden calls “the cautionary tale in all August’s plays—a charge to all of us to do better, not just Levee.”

Ma Rainey, the first play Wilson wrote in what would become his majestic Century Cycle—10 plays exploring black American life in each decade of the 20th Century—will be performed at Red Bank’s Two River Theater September 10 through October 9. It will be the fourth play in the cycle that Two River has mounted, after *Jitney* (2012), *Two Trains Running* (2014) and *Seven Guitars* (2015). The theater plans to complete the cycle in coming years.

Ma Rainey was the first of the cycle to reach Broadway, in 1984. Its titanic title character is based on the real Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, the 1920s “Mother of the Blues” whose famous hit ended with the lyrics, “I done shown y’all my black bottom/You ought to learn that dance.”

Wilson’s play, set in a Chicago record-

ing studio in 1927, explicates dances far more fraught and complex: between the great black singer (played by Arnetia Walker, of *Dreamgirls* on Broadway) and the white studio owner who resents that she “marches in here like she owns the damn place;” between Rainey and her talented, volatile trumpeter, Levee; and between the black creators of the music and those who control and profit from it.

Dirden describes *Ma* and *Levee* as “gale forces on a collision course,” but it is a sudden act of violence by Levee, against a fellow black musician, that seals his fate and sends Wilson’s tragedy rippling into the present.

Dirden, 38, a veteran of five previous Wilson productions, sees Levee as “a PTSD victim.” The audience learns that as a child Levee saw a white mob rape his mother and that his father was killed while trying to extract revenge.

“To have that origin story,” Dirden says, “and grow up to say, ‘I still have art in me I want to share with the world’ takes a warrior spirit. And August was drawn to the warrior spirit.”

Ma Rainey’s director, Ruben Santiago-Hudson, who worked with Wilson (1945-

2005) and is one of the leading exponents of his oeuvre, calls Dirden “smart, talented, fearless. He has everything you need to dig deep into the vulnerabilities and absurdities of a character.”

Dirden has range. Winner of a 2012 Obie Award as Boy Willie in Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*, he played MLK on Broadway in *All The Way*, opposite Bryan Cranston as LBJ. On FX’s *The Americans*, Dirden plays perspicacious FBI agent Aderholt. In Baz Luhrmann’s new Netflix series, *The Get Down*, about the birth of rap in the Bronx in the 1970s, Dirden is paternal yet streetwise Leon.

Dirden and brother Jason, 36, also an actor (who Dirden directed in Two River’s *Seven Guitars*), grew up in Houston, sons of actor Willie Dirden. After studying theater at Morehouse College in Atlanta and the University of Illinois, Dirden began his career in Atlanta before moving to New York. He and his wife, actress Crystal Dickinson (who he directed in *Seven Guitars*) live in West Orange with son Chase, two. She’s a Jersey native; her parents still live in Irvington. As he says with a smile, “I married one of your finest.” —Eric Levin