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Two Brothers, Both August Wilson Stalwarts, Play the Same Role on Opposite Coasts

By MICHAEL PAULSON

The work of [August Wilson](#) has for years sustained Brandon and Jason Dirden, actor brothers who have found themselves turning again and again to his plays for meaning and inspiration. Now, for the first time, the two are playing the same role, at the same time, on opposite coasts: Levee, the angrily ambitious trumpeter in one of Wilson's best-known plays, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

Brandon is playing the role in a production directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson [at Two River Theater](#) in Red Bank, N.J., through Sunday; Jason is in a production directed by Phylicia Rashad [at Center Theater Group](#) in Los Angeles through Oct. 16. (They have performed together before, [in "Topdog/Underdog."](#) and have both portrayed Lyons in Wilson's "Fences," though not at the same time.)

Each Dirden brother was 11 when he first encountered Wilson's work, Brandon as a performer, and Jason as an audience member.

Those experiences have transformed the careers of both actors, who have spent decades immersed in the world Wilson constructed in his treasured Century Cycle, a set of 10 plays illuminating the African-American experience.

Each brother aspires to complete the entire cycle. Both are already well on their way: Brandon, now 38 and recently known for television roles in "The Americans" and "The Get Down," has acted in four plays in the series and directed one; Jason, 36, and seen on television in "Greenleaf," has acted in four and did staged readings of two others.

The two spoke in a joint telephone interview about their relationship with Wilson and with each other. Here are edited excerpts from the conversation.





Jason Dirden, right foreground, in “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” in Los Angeles.
Credit Craig Schwartz

How did you first encounter August Wilson?

BRANDON DIRDEN I’ve been speaking the words of August Wilson longer than I haven’t. The first play I did was “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone” — I was 11, and I played Reuben. Even at 11 or 12, I knew these plays were special — they were highlighting aspects of the black experience that we were thirsty for, and at every point I jump at the chance to work on this material.

JASON DIRDEN I didn’t pick up acting until I was a sophomore in high school, but we saw a lot of theater because our father was an actor, and I saw “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” when I was too young to see it, at the Alley Theater [in Houston], and I can remember having an “Oh, wow,” experience, thinking, “That’s what theater is.”

Did you ever meet August Wilson?

BRANDON I spent a lot of time with him in 1998 — he was in residency at Dartmouth, and I was at Morehouse, so I requested an exchange and studied at Dartmouth for a semester. They were doing a student production of “Joe Turner’s Come and Gone,” and I got into that play. August was around a lot. And he was a big smoker. I was 19, and I wasn’t a smoker, but I would buy packs of cigarettes just to stand on a corner and have those few minutes of smoke breaks with him. I would get sick as a dog, but I cherished them so much.

JASON He came to Atlanta to speak to the students in the theater department at Spelman, and I was in charge of picking him up at his hotel. The travel time should have been seven minutes,

but I got a little lost, so we took 25 minutes to campus. “You must have taken the scenic route,” he said.

What is Levee like?

JASON He is bold, braggadocious, smart, and in his mind he’s a musical genius, trying to push music forward. He’s also a victim of his early childhood environment, still trying to find happiness and joy and success. And Levee goes from his best day ever to his worst possible day in the course of this play, so I’m relishing every single moment we have to play this guy.

BRANDON Levee is all those things, and, in addition, he’s a clown of sorts, who uses clowning to turn the tide in his favor.

How do you differ as actors, and how does that affect your performances as Levee?

BRANDON I’m certainly much more verbose than Jason, more extroverted, and I think there’s some of that in Levee. But there is also a facet of Levee that is very private, something sneaky about Levee — you don’t know what’s bottled up inside him, and Jason may have that.



Brandon Dirden as Levee in August Wilson’s “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom” at Two River Theater in Red Bank, N.J. Credit T Charles Erickson

JASON I absolutely agree — Brandon is bigger and more spotlight-hogging, not in a negative way, and there’s this innate quality in me, that Levee has, that’s calculated and watching to

know how to attack the situation. Our energies are different. But I'm a great actor, and Brandon is a very fine actor as well, so we'll have two different points of view attacking the role, but will find similar moments.

Are you giving each other notes?

JASON We don't. I don't want Brandon stealing my stuff!

BRANDON I don't want to steal any of his stuff, trust me!

"Jitney" is coming to Broadway this season — the only Century Cycle play never staged there before. Will you guys be involved?

BRANDON If the call comes down, neither one of us would hesitate to answer it. But so many wonderful actors have committed themselves to this canon, it would be an honor for anybody.

JASON The other August Wilson play that has not been on Broadway is [his one-man show](#) ["How I Learned What I Learned"]. Maybe when we're older we can do it together — take turns and rotate.