



## Two Brothers Are Playing the Same Role at the Same Time (in Different Places)

BY MEREDITH GANZMAN  
SEP 22, 2016



Brandon and Jason Dirden couldn't be more different, but they add the same role to their resume—at the same time.

"Our parents say they will use scorecards to rate our performances," Jason Dirden jokes.



Glynn Turman, Damon Gupton, Keith David and Jason Dirden (Craig Schwartz)

The Dirden brothers are both playing Levee in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Brandon J. Dirden is performing in the play at the Two River Theater in New Jersey, and Jason is at the Mark Taper Forum in California.

Due to their schedules, Jason will not be able to see Brandon's production, though Brandon is hoping to make it to a performance in Jason's final week. "I will be relieved that my run will be done, and I can just enjoy watching him," Brandon says.

This is a first for the brothers—they are two artists with two different energies, approaching the same play and character with two different points of view. "It's exciting. I don't know what [Brandon] will do different [in the role]... I know he's going to be incredible," Jason says.

Levee is "one of the most challenging roles I've ever done," Brandon says. The story of black recording artists being exploited by white producers in 1920s Chicago, Levee is a trumpeter in a blues group. Like Levee, Brandon remembers how he felt when he first moved to New York City to pursue acting. "I knew the hunger of having the talent and then wanting the role," Brandon says.

And with the current "Fair Wage Onstage" movement for Off-Broadway Equity actors and stage managers seeking a higher wage for their work, Brandon, recently working more in film and television than theatre in order to better provide for his family, says the story is more relevant than ever.

But the opportunity to work on this **August Wilson** play was invaluable for the brothers. "I owe 90 percent of my career to August Wilson. ... He is the ground for which I stand on for art and the desire to tell stories," Jason says. In fact, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was the first play Jason remembers seeing at age 11.

Brandon was even younger when Wilson came into his life. At age nine, in his first professional production, he played the young boy Reuben in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* at the Alley Theater in Houston, TX. He is proud to be part of Wilson's legacy of actors. "I know that me giving voice to his characters will help other people find their voice," he says.

The sons of actor Willie James Dirden, Jason says he and his brother always had their father's support and mentoring. Growing up and practicing monologues in front of their father, he would pretend to fall asleep if Jason or Brandon weren't "being real" in their acting. Brandon and Jason are the youngest of five siblings. But it is Brandon, the middle child, who is most like their father, Jason says—"He came out of the womb performing."

"I had to do something to remind people I existed," Brandon recalls.

Working separately on the same role may be new, but they have played brothers in *The First Breeze of Summer* (2008) and starred together in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (2012), both at Signature Theatre Company. And, in 2015, Brandon directed Jason in Wilson's *Seven Guitars* at the Two Rivers Theater. They deeply trust each other as scene partners, and they both already know each other's "tricks," Jason says, challenging each other to advance their craft.

Jason has always admired Brandon's acting (Brandon is two years older). "I didn't want to be the same actor he was, but I wanted to do the type of work he was doing," Jason said. The feeling is mutual. When Jason appeared in this summer's *Skeleton Crew* at the **Atlantic Theater Company**, he was so good, Brandon recalled, "I didn't want to get back on stage and ruin the Dirden name," adding that Jason is a meticulous and courageous actor.

It's a friendly and loving competition between the brothers. The 2014 Broadway revival of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In The Sun*, starring **Denzel Washington**, is one of the few instances in which they both auditioned for the same role in a production. Jason won the role of George Murchison, and that season Brandon starred in Robert Schenkkan's *All The Way* as Martin Luther King, Jr. The productions both won Tony Awards for Best Revival of a Play and Best Play, respectively.

"We were raised in a house where the last name was more important than the first," Brandon says. As long as a Dirden is there, the family is proud.

*Brandon Dirden stars in Ma Rainey's Black Bottom at Two River Theater, directed by **Ruben Santiago-Hudson**, through October 9; Jason in Los Angeles, CA, at the Mark Taper Forum, directed by **Phylicia Rashad**, through October 16.*



Brandon J. Dirden, Crystal A. Dickinson and Jason Dirden (Monica Simoes)