



RED BANK: MA RAINEY'S BLOCK PARTY @TRTC



Returning star Brandon J. Dirden (above) is among the cast members expected to attend — while J.W. Lawson and Dean Shot (below) bring the live blues tunes — as Two River Theater keynotes the season opening-production of 'Ma Rainey's Black Bottom' with a Friday evening "block party."

While we're still a few Saturdays away from the start of the new 2016-2017 schedule at Two River Theater, the Red Bank performing arts space is keeping it outside for the moment — with a special event that harnesses the magic-hour mojo of the late-summertime season and sounds an early keynote for a blues-infused season opener.

That inaugural production is "Ma Rainey's



Black Bottom," the August Wilson ensemble piece that opens September 16 as the latest in Two River's ongoing exploration of the late African American playwright's "century cycle" of dramas. The special event is a Taste of the Blues Block Party that rocks the theater's open-air patio with a Friday evening fricassee of live music, dancing, locally sourced cuisine, and "a chance to meet and mingle with the cast."

At ten players strong, that cast promises to bring a powerhouse level of talent to town — including (in the title role of the real-life blues chanteuse Ma Rainey) stage and screen veteran **Arnetia Walker**, whose formidable list of Broadway credits boasts "Raisin," "The Wiz," and "Dreamgirls" (in which she holds the distinction of being the only actress to have played all three of the lead female roles). The ensemble also spotlights a young actress who stands to be magazine-cover material in the year to come: **Chanté Adams**, who will star as hip hop MC Roxanne Shanté (eponymous epicenter of the legendary "Roxanne Wars" of the 1980s) in the forthcoming Forest Whitaker-Pharrell Williams film "Roxanne, Roxanne."

Also in the cast are a couple of celebrated leading men who have been regular fixtures on the Two River Theater Company mainstage. Obie winner **Brandon J. Dirden** — who appeared as Martin Luther King Jr. (alongside Bryan Cranston's LBJ) in the Broadway Tony winner "All the Way," and whose regular role on TV's "The Americans" has upped the ante on his nationwide profile — returns to Red Bank for his fifth TRTC project, and his third Wilson excursion here (having co-starred in "Jitney," and made his directorial debut with last season's "Seven Guitars").

Making his first-ever appearance in an August Wilson play is Shakespearean specialist and stage-screen stalwart **Michael Cumpsty**, the Obie winner (as "Hamlet") and Tony nominee (for "End of the Rainbow") whose numerous projects as actor and director for TRTC have included the Bard's "Much Ado About Nothing," Noel Coward's "Present Laughter," and Wendy Wasserstein's "Third." The British-born Broadway veteran will follow up his participation in "Ma Rainey" with a starring turn as English monarch King Henry II in James Goldman's modern classic "The Lion in Winter," going up this November at Two River.

They're all working under the direction of another frequent artistic partner at Two River: Tony winning actor-director-playwright **Ruben Santiago-Hudson**, the onetime Wilson collaborator who previously helmed TRTC's stagings of "Jitney" and "Two Trains Running" (and whose original script "Your Blues Ain't Sweet Like Mine" starred Dirden). Set in a Chicago recording studio in 1927 — and standing out as the sole entry in Wilson's ten-play cycle that's not situated in Pittsburgh's Hill District — "Ma Rainey's

"Black Bottom" looks in on a recording session by "The Mother of the Blues" and her band; a drama-filled interlude that's punctuated with some well-chosen music — but fraught with professional rivalries, personal vendettas, racial tensions, and other conflicts that threaten to reach a boiling point. Cooler heads promise to prevail out on the patio for the free Friday night Block Party that gets underway at 7 p.m. — with live tunes furnished by Dean Shot and the Solid Senders, the hard-touring jump blues/ rockabilly/ R&B combo that's joined for the occasion by frequent guest performer J.W. Lawson. There's also an opportunity to enter a free raffle for tickets to the show — and while there's no charge for admission to the event, reservations and additional details can be had by going here.

"Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" goes up in previews on September 10 and continues through October 9. Take it here to reserve tickets for and other offerings in the new Two River season — then catch up with Ruben Santiago-Hudson and Brandon J. Dirden as they discuss working with the legacy of August Wilson, in archived interviews on **redbankgreen**.