



INTERVIEWS

Thousands of Miles Apart, Brothers Brandon and Jason Dirden Take On the Same Role

The Dirden brothers star in two different productions of August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

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"I have been sending him music files of me playing the trumpet," says Jason Dirden. "I don't know if I'm trying to impress him, or saying how jealous I am that he doesn't have to learn it." "You don't know what I have to learn," replies his older brother, Brandon Dirden, with a laugh. "You assume I don't have to learn it!"

The brothers Dirden have acted opposite each other before, notably in Suzan-Lori Parks' *Topdog/Underdog* and August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. The elder Dirden even directed the younger in Wilson's *Seven Guitars*. But this fall brings an experience they've never had: They're playing the same character, Levee, in two different productions of Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

Brandon Dirden will play the hotheaded trumpeter in Ruben Santiago-Hudson's staging of the drama at Two River Theater in New Jersey (September 10-October 9). Jason Dirden takes the stage in Phylicia Rashad's mounting of the work at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles through October 16. While they aren't competitive, they are both coming to terms with how this unusual experience will affect their brotherly bond.



Brothers Brandon Dirden and Jason Dirden are playing the same role in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* in two different productions. (© David Gordon)

Was there serendipity in the way you both came to play Levee, or was it just the normal process?

Jason Dirden: We both had working relationships and friendships with the two directors of the play, Ruben Santiago-Hudson and Phylicia Rashad. I had previously worked with Phylicia as an actor in 2010, and then she directed me in *A Raisin in the Sun* in 2011. I said, "You know what? I really want to do this role. Let me just give her a call and throw my hat in." She called me back shortly after, and we ended the conversation with a few details, but she didn't offer me the role.

And then, when she was doing *Head of Passes* in New York, the night I ended up going to see it, Kelley Kirkpatrick, the associate artistic director of the Taper, was there. I ended up talking to Kelley for ten minutes about *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and Phylicia comes over and the first thing she says is, "Have you been practicing your trumpet?" Three days later, I got an email saying Phylicia wanted to offer me the role of Levee.

Brandon Dirden: Mine is a much simpler story. I've had a relationship with Two River going back to 2012, acting and now directing August Wilson shows there. The great thing about Two River is that they are dedicated to providing artistic homes to artists. [Artistic director] John Diaz is committed to doing all of August's plays and this was next on his punch list. Ruben gave him

a call to see if I was available. I will always make myself available if I can for Ruben, Two River, and August Wilson.

This play, in particular, has always been on Jason's and my short list of roles we wanted to do. I didn't know if I'd ever get the chance to do it. I thought my chance of doing it was probably behind me. When this came up, it was a godsend.



Brandon Dirden and Jason Dirden in Two River Theater's 2012 production of Suzan-Lori Parks' Topdog/Underdog. (© T Charles Erickson)

Are you both upset you won't get to see each other's productions?

Brandon: Yeah, and I'm relieved I don't have to watch him. When I directed Jason in *Seven Guitars* last year, it was astonishing watching him navigate the role of Canewell and carving out a space for himself. Usually when Jason and I are working together, we're acting alongside each other. I never really get to see him in that light, as an audience member. The growth that Jason had in that role as an actor was breathtaking to watch. In *Skeleton Crew*, I thought he was absolutely brilliant. I remember sitting in the audience and thinking, "Oh man, I don't know if I want to get onstage again. I do not want to soil the good Dirden name."

Jason: Brandon, thank you for that, man. I really appreciate that. I am upset that I won't be able to see his *Levee*. Although we've never been raised to be competitive in the negative way, there's a natural competition of younger brother and older brother doing the same thing. I don't want to compete with him in order for him to lose; I want to compete for me to win. We've both been acting for a while, and I feel like I've experienced life enough and matured in a way to

where I do feel like I'm coming into my own as an individual and as an artist. For a long time I was heavily influenced by Brandon. I admired what he was doing so much, and I felt that's the way to do it. I wasn't trying to be him as an actor, but I was trying to be good. And he was good. He was great. Now my skill sets are becoming uniquely Jason. I would like to see how what he's doing is different, and [when] compared as artists, say, "Oh, wow, we're really great in our own individual way."

Have you thought about other roles in August Wilson's plays that you'd like to do together?

Jason: Right now, I think the show that I would love to do with Brandon is *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Brandon really wants to play Seth, and his wife, Crystal, really wants to play Bertha. I want to play Jeremy.

Brandon: The great thing about August is that with his body of work, we can dream about roles in the canon for the rest of our lives. There is never a point in my life where I'm not suitable for an August Wilson role. We can even look at *Gem of the Ocean* when we are old men, doing Solly Two Kings and Eli.



Brandon Dirden and Jason Dirden flank Brandon's wife, actress Crystal A. Dickinson. (© Allison Stock)