

ASBURY & PARK PRESS

'Raisin in the Sun' kicks off Two River season



Tom Chesek, CORRESPONDENT

The New York Times famously stated that it "changed American theater forever" — and when he announced the addition of "A Raisin in the Sun" to the Two River Theater schedule, artistic

director John Dias did not hesitate to place it “in the canon of the world’s greatest plays ever written.”

Take those elevated expectations, add the names of the artists who've risen to its challenge (Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Audra McDonald, Sidney Poitier, Denzel Washington, even Sean "Diddy" Combs), and one might think that actors would tiptoe gingerly around the modern classic drama by Lorraine Hansberry that opens the 2017-2018 season at the Red Bank theater.

For Crystal A. Dickinson, it's a chance to plunge into "something that's always been dear to me;" an experience that's working out to be "challenging, exhausting ... fun but not fun." And for the Irvington native, the drama of a black American family struggling to reconcile big dreams with the hard realities of survival in 1950s Chicago is also a family affair on several levels.

In the production under the direction of Two River newcomer Carl Cofield, the young Broadway veteran portrays Ruth Younger, the "support, if not the centerpiece" of an extended-family household that includes husband Walter (Brandon J. Dirden), their young son Travis (Owen Tabaka), plus Walter's recently widowed mother Lena (Two River returnee Brenda Pressley) and his sister Beneatha (Jasmine Batchelor).



Two River Theater in Red Bank. (Photo: COURTESY OF TWO RIVER THEATER)

Beneatha is a young woman at a crossroads between the influences of two men, one "assimilated" and one focused on his African heritage. As Dickinson tells it, it's been an eye opener for someone for whom the play has long been "part of my life ... I've taught it in a class, but having that experience and actually doing the play are two completely different things.

"I always wanted to play Beneatha, but when the the opportunity to play Ruth presented itself, I didn't expect to love it as much as I have," the actress says, adding that her character is "a witness, in a house of dreamers. ... She exists somewhere between Mama's 'old guard' and more progressive younger people. She also has her own dreams. She just doesn't put them on display."

Given matriarch Lena's dream of moving her family on up to a new (and traditionally all-white) neighborhood — and Walter's desire to gamble his family's future on the dream of owning his own business — Ruth has her hands full keeping things grounded.



Branden J. Dirden stars in "A Raisin in the Sun," which kicks off Two River Theater's 2017-18 season. (Photo: COURTESY OF TWO RIVER THEATER)

The show marks the first time that Dickinson has shared the Two River stage with Dirden, the frequent Two River leading man ("Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," "Topdog/ Underdog," "Your Blues Ain't Sweet Like Mine," and a production of August Wilson's "Jitney" that he rode to the Broadway stage), who also happens to be her husband.

The two would appear as Martin Luther King Jr. and Coretta Scott King in the Boston run of "All the Way" — he'd continue on to that show's Tony-winning Broadway engagement, while she'd give birth to the couple's now 3-year-old son Chase.

A couple of seasons back, first-time director Dirden would work with Dickinson in her New Jersey theatrical debut, during a Two River staging of Wilson's "Seven Guitars" that co-starred her brother-in-law, Jason Dirden.

There's another family-within-a-family component to this "Raisin," and that's the presence of Dickinson's father-in-law, veteran character player Willie Dirden, in the role of Walter's pal and prospective partner Bobo. This marks the first time that the three family members have performed together — and, as Crystal explains, it's a special occasion in more ways than one.

"Willie will be getting his Equity card with this show," she says of the father of five who had put aside his professional acting dreams to support his Houston-based family. "And opening night is also his birthday ... so this is cause for a celebration all around!"

Whether deferred, delayed or destroyed by self-doubts, betrayals and far-from level playing fields, dreams loom large in Hansberry's seminal work; a scenario in which, according to Dickinson, "every character has a dignity and an importance.

"But what happens when you have dreams that you just can't realize? It's a challenging time for us all ... and, as it happens, a great time to be asking that question."

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

WHEN: Through Oct. 8

WHERE: Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Ave., Red Bank

TICKETS: \$20 to \$70

INFO: 732-345-1400 or www.tworivertheater.org