

## **‘A Raisin in the Sun’ remains relevant and riveting in Two River Theater production**

By: JAY LUSTIG



T. CHARLES ERICKSON. Crystal A. Dickinson and Brandon J. Dirden co-star in “A Raisin in the Sun,” which is at the Two River Theater in Red Bank through Oct. 8.

I’ve been writing New Jersey theater reviews for three years now, and one of the things I’ve learned in that time is that no one plays complex, charismatic protagonists better than Two River Theater mainstay Brandon J. Dirden.

He was excellent in the Red Bank theater’s “Your Blues Ain’t Sweet Like Mine” in 2015, and even better in “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom,” last year. He also directed a fine Two River

production of “Seven Guitars” in 2015, and is back, now, playing Walter Lee Younger in the classic “A Raisin in the Sun” through Oct. 8.

The 1959 play, written by Lorraine Hansberry and set in a run-down apartment on the South Side of Chicago, unfolds with the horrifying inevitability of a Greek tragedy, though it’s arguably not a tragedy itself, due to its somewhat hopeful ending.

Director Carl Cofield has put together a straightforward version of it here: He doesn’t try to reinvent it in any way. But “A Raisin in the Sun” is not in need of reinvention. Sadly, its Civil Rights Era concerns seem as relevant as ever.

At the start of the play, Walter Lee’s family is expecting a check for \$10,000 (which would be about \$84,000 now, adjusted for inflation). His father has recently died, and it’s a life insurance payment.

He wants to use the money to open a liquor store, but his younger sister Beneatha (Jasmine Batchelor) wants to use at least some of it to go to medical school. Walter Lee now works as a chauffeur, and though it’s a decent job, he yearns to make more of his life.



Crystal A. Dickinson, left, with Brenda Pressley and Owen Tabaka in “A Raisin in the Sun.”

His no-nonsense wife Ruth (Crystal A. Dickinson) is skeptical, and his mother Lena (Brenda Pressley), a devout Christian, is against the idea of the family becoming involved in a liquor store. But Ruth eventually warms up to the idea, and Lena comes up with a kind of compromise. She splits the money three ways, with a third (more or less) going to a down payment on a nicer house they can all live in, a third going to Beneatha's education, and a third to Walter Lee's liquor store. Walter Lee is ecstatic.

The house she finds is in a white neighborhood, Clybourne Park, and her down payment provokes a visit from Karl Linder (Nat DeWolf) of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association. Linder, polite but insensitive (and a bit cartoonishly drawn), wants to keep them out of the neighborhood, and tries to bribe them, offering more money for the new house than they were planning to pay for it. They reject his offer at first, but are, later, tempted to take it.

In another subplot, Beneatha is dating two handsome suitors, the rich but cloddish George Murchison (York Walker) and a far more gentlemanly African exchange student, Joseph Asagai (Charlie Hudson III). Not much of a competition there.

But the play is mainly about Walter Lee — the indignities he has to endure, and the way the world's cruel realities crush his dreams. It's a meaty part. Walter Lee is smart and charming, but can be bitterly cutting when bickering with Ruth, or heartbreakingly vulnerable when telling his son Travis (Owen Tabaka) about his aspirations, or consumed with rage when things don't go his way. Dirden is equally convincing no matter which of Walter Lee's extremes he is embodying.

At the end of the play, Walter Lee is still far from where he wants to be. Yet his family remains intact, and the bonds that hold them together are still strong. The hardships of their lives have made them resilient, and they are ready to face whatever the future holds for them. "A Raisin in the Sun" will be at the Two River Theater in Red Bank through Oct. 8; visit [tworivertheater.org](http://tworivertheater.org).