



## RED BANK: RAISIN' A FAMILY @ TWO RIVER



***Crystal A. Dickinson and Brandon J. Dirden share the stage in the season opening production of 'A Raisin in the Sun.'***  
*(Photo by Lisa Campbell)*

While it doesn't claim anything resembling a formal "stock company" of actors and other creative types, Red Bank's professional Two River Theater Company has been more than happy to foster some mutually beneficial relationships with a number of recurring players — perhaps none more so than Brandon J. Dirden, the Tony-

nominated, Obie-winning stage-screen talent who's made himself quite comfortable on Bridge Avenue, even as his star ascended on television (*The Americans*) and Broadway (*All the Way*, in which he appeared as no less iconic a presence than Martin Luther King Jr.).

In addition to offering lead roles in scripts by August Wilson (including a production of *Jitney* that reconvened for a Tony-winning turn on Broadway last year), Suzan-Lori Parks (*Topdog/Underdog*) and frequent director Ruben Santiago-Hudson (*Your Blues Ain't Sweet Like Mine*), the Two River stage also provided the setting for Dirden's own acclaimed directorial debut, with a staging of Wilson's *Seven Guitars*. That 2015 project allowed him to work with a cast that featured brother Jason Dirden, as well as an actress with whom he's evidenced a considerable degree of chemistry: real life spouse Crystal A. Dickinson. And when the figurative curtain goes up on a new mainstage season at Two River this weekend, Brandon and Crystal will be sharing that stage for the first time in a classic drama that's all about family on more than one level.

The 2017-2018 season keynote is one that TRTC artistic director John Dias has described as being "in the canon of the world's greatest plays ever written" — Lorraine Hansberry's masterpiece ***A Raisin in the Sun***. In the production under the direction of Two River first timer (and frequent specialist in the works of Shakespeare) Carl Cofield, Dickinson and Dirden co-star as Ruth and Walter Lee Younger, the nominal heads of a 1950's South Chicago household in which dreams, schemes and basic mechanisms for survival bump up against self-doubt, betrayals, and the thousand harsh realities of life as a black American.

While the parents of three year old Chase Ari Dirden will be stepping into the shoes of some fairly formidable predecessors (Sidney Poitier, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Audra Macdonald, Denzel Washington, even Sean "Diddy" Combs), they'll also be working in concert with a cast of pros that includes Brenda Pressley (Two River's *Trouble in Mind* and *In This House*) as wise and long-suffering matriarch Lena Younger; Jasmine Batchelor as Walter's sister Beneatha; 10-year-old Owen Tabaka as son Travis; and, in the role of Walter's buddy and potential business partner Bobo, none other than Brandon's father, veteran character actor Willie Dirden. The Dirdens will have plenty of time to keep it all in the family. The production goes up in previews this Saturday night; opens officially on Friday, September 15; and continues with a mix of matinee and evening performances through October 8. Take it here for tickets (\$20 – \$70) — or call (732) 345-1400 for details on a special package that combines Saturday's 8 p.m. preview performance with a 6 p.m. cocktail reception (plus 7 p.m. cast meet and greet) as a benefit for the scholarship programs of the nonprofit Monmouth County Cotillion Committee.