



RED BANK: TWO RIVER INTROS NEW SEASON



Michael Cumpsty, Brandon Dirden and Ruben Santiago-Hudson (pictured at an August 2016 event promoting the Two River Theater production of MA RAINEY'S BLACK BOTTOM) are among the returning artists who are scheduled to contribute to the upcoming 2017-18 season at the Bridge Avenue arts center.

It's a season highlighted by a bevy of returning talents, both on the stage and behind the scenes. A season that boasts an enhanced slate of offerings for young theatergoers; more outreach to the area's growing Spanish-speaking audience, some never-before-seen works, and several fresh perspectives on familiar stories — including *two* by a certain Wilde man of English letters, as well as one even Wilder. When Two River Theater Company raised the curtain on its upcoming 2017-2018 schedule of productions on Sunday night, it did so via a genuine "rite of spring"

tradition at the Bridge Avenue artspace, as TRTC's celebrated artistic director John Dias and a panel of guests heralded the company's 24th season with a "debt of gratitude" to founders Robert and Joan Rechnitz ("the two most glorious people I know"), a tip of the hat to the faithful supporters ("we know you care about this as much as we do"), and a brief channeling of Sally Field ("you actually like us!").

Here's the lineup for next season; a schedule set to begin after Labor Day:

A Raisin in the Sun (September 8 – October 8). Lorraine Hansberry's classic drama — one that Dias describes as "in the canon of the world's greatest plays ever written" — receives its first-ever Two River production under director Carl Cofield. Starring is Obie winner Brandon J. Dirden, an electrifying talent who's become a regular presence in Red Bank, both as actor (*Top Dog/Underdog*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*) and director (*Seven Guitars*) even as he's built a solid career on Broadway (*All the Way*) and television (*The Americans*). Dirden will be joined in the cast by his wife, actress Crystal Dickinson — as well as by his father, veteran character actor Willie Dirden.

Skeletons: A Day of the Dead Bedtime Story (October 12-15). From New York's Teatro SEA company comes this family offering — performed in English and in Spanish — in which a young boy's late grandfather returns for a Dia de los Muertos day of adventure.

The Importance of Being Earnest (November 11 – December 3). Oscar Wilde's 19th century comedy of manners becomes the "very subversive" vehicle for the encore directorial effort of a celebrated Two River regular: Obie-winning, Tony-nominated actor Michael Cumpsty, who directed Annette O'Toole in the Two River production of *Third* a couple of seasons back (and who described Wilde's "Trivial Comedy for Serious People" as "so much fun...it's still the one to beat").

The Rainbow Fish (December 15-18). The beloved children's book by Marcus Pfister makes a colorful debut as a stage piece for young audiences, in an adaptation from Nova Scotia-based Mermaid Theatre (who brought Eric Carle's *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* to vivid life at Two River in 2014). Plans are for the Red Bank premiere production to be recorded as an official video.

El Coquí Espectacular and the Bottle of Doom (January 6 – February 4, 2018). Emerging from Two River's annual Crossing Borders festival of new Latino plays — and developed with a grant from actor Kevin Spacey — the script by Matthew Barbot is a tale of two brothers: one a successful advertising exec, the other a self-styled neighborhood superhero. Jose Zayas (TRTC's *Pinkolandia*) directs the play's fully staged premiere.

The Bridge of San Luis Rey (February 17 – March 18, 2018). The Pulitzer Prize novel by Thornton Wilder (who's also famed for his Pulitzer-winning American classic *Our Town*) is brought to the stage by an exciting guest artist making his Red Bank debut: five-time Obie winning actor and playwright David Greenspan. Two River commissioned Greenspan (whose upcoming projects include a one-man, five-hour, nine-act version of Eugene O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*) to adapt Wilder's

masterful meditation on the nature of life and love, set in the aftermath of a tragedy in which five people lose their lives.

A Little Shakespeare (March 6-11, 2018). Details to be announced, as per Two River's Kate Cordaro, for the company's annual staging of a Bard classic with a cast of high school age performers.

Dancing at Lughnasa (April 14 – May 13, 2018). Brian Friel's Tony winning memory play of five sisters in 1930s Ireland has acquired scores of fans both on stage and on film; it's revived in Red Bank under the direction of another Two River returnee — Jessica Stone, who proved her comic mettle in previous productions of *Absurd Person Singular* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

The Young King (April 20-22, 2018). Another from the pen of Oscar Wilde (this one an adaptation by Nicki Bloom and Australia's Slingsby company), the moralistic story of a peasant boy who is suddenly crowned ruler of a kingdom — and his realization that the trappings of wealth and beauty come at a price for those who struggle to create and provide them — is pitched at an "older kids" audience.

Oo-Bla-Dee (June 9 – July 1, 2018). It's a "redeveloped, rethought, revisited" take on a previously produced play by Regina Taylor (the Golden Globe winning star of TV's *I'll Fly Away*); one that Dias observes "has a patina of newness about it." Tony winning actor-director-playwright Ruben Santiago-Hudson returns once more to Red Bank to helm this ensemble piece about an all-female bebop jazz combo in the post-WWII era, infused with a newly created score of original music by composer Diedre L. Murray. Taking the mic at Sunday's intro event, Crystal Dickinson furnished a taste of the play's poetic soul when she performed an excerpt as the narrator "Luna C."

There's plenty more in store with Two River's current 23rd season, of course, beginning with the imminent arrival of ***The Women of Padilla*** by Tony Meneses (*Guadalupe in the Guest Room*), about which more to come in here on **redbankgreen**. Then beginning June 3, TRTC presents the highly anticipated world premiere of ***The Ballad of Little Jo***, an original musical (adapted from the 1993 film of the same name) with songs by Mike Reid and Sarah Schlesinger (*In This House, A Wind in the Willows Christmas*) — and a book co-written by John Dias, who makes his own directorial debut with the project.

Tickets and full schedule details for these and all other announced productions are available now on the Two River website or by calling the box office at (732)345-1400.