

# THEATERMANIA

## INTERVIEWS

### **Father and Son Actors Willie and Brandon J. Dirden Share the Stage in *Raisin in the Sun***

Two River Theater presents Lorraine Hansberry's seminal drama.



Brandon J. Dirden and Willie Dirden star in *A Raisin in the Sun* at Two River Theater. (photos provided by Two River Theater)

David Gordon • New Jersey

For Brandon J. Dirden, one of the great stage actors of his generation, performing is a family affair.

Brandon and his younger brother, Jason, have acted opposite each other in *Topdog/Underdog* and *The Piano Lesson*, and Brandon has even directed his sibling in *Seven Guitars*. They've even played the same role in the same play, in different productions across the country. Meanwhile, Brandon and his wife, Crystal A. Dickinson, have a similarly long theatrical history, sharing the stage in *The First Breeze of Summer*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Detroit '67*, and *Clybourne Park*.

Now, another Dirden has stepped into the mix. Willie Dirden, father to Brandon and father-in-law to Crystal, is joining the pair in Two River Theater's production of Lorraine Hansberry's seminal family drama, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Brandon is Walter Lee Younger, Crystal is Ruth Younger, and Willie, a longtime veteran of the regional theater scene, takes on the role of Walter Lee's pal Bobo.

None of the Dirdens could pass up this opportunity to work together, even if it made Brandon wonder if his father was going to give him acting notes.

**Whose idea was it to cast the two of you as Walter Lee and Bobo?**

**Brandon J. Dirden:** It started with John Dias, the artistic director of Two River Theater. They have never produced *A Raisin in the Sun*, and John thought it was the time for this one to be done. He approached Crystal and me, and I actually had to think about it. I never imagined I'd play Walter Lee. I just love watching the play so much. In my opinion, it is one of the finest plays ever written in world drama.

I said, "If I'm gonna do this play that I love so much, I want to do it with people that I love." We thought it would be a good idea to get Dad involved. It's still amazing that it actually came together and that Dad said yes, that he wants to get onstage with me!

**Willie Dirden:** To work with Brandon and Crystal? It took me all of 20 minutes to make that decision. I knew it would be a pleasure just to be in that company. The thought that went through my mind was, what challenges am I going to face after being off the stage for so long? But it's like riding a bicycle.

**Were you afraid to work with each other in this capacity?**

**Brandon:** To be honest, I didn't know what it would be like. My dad has always served on my personal advisory committee. He'd come see shows since I was a boy, and he'd always be complimentary, but he'd always have notes and tips for me. Coming into this rehearsal process, I thought, "Oh my god, is my dad going to be giving me notes during this process?" But we blocked our first scene, and I didn't even think that this is my father. This is just another great actor in the room.

**Willie:** It was just a matter of working with another professional actor. I watched my son grow from a child into the very mature and beautiful actor that he is today. When the scenes are over, I step back with a dad's pride. Like the line in the play: "Look what the new world has wrought."



Brandon J. Dirden, his wife, Crystal A. Dickinson, and his brother, Jason Dirden.  
(© Allison Stock)

### **How is *A Raisin in the Sun* still relevant?**

**Willie:** Everything about the play, if you look at the overt messages and the nuanced messages, is applicable to today's society. The central thread, as I see it, of people disliking or hating or fighting each other for all the wrong reasons is still very much happening today. Just take the events in Charlottesville, Virginia. Those who started the whole thing hate others for all the wrong reasons. The reason to love each other is that we are all the same. We're all traveling the same road, with all of the same goals.

**Brandon:** People often wonder what's gonna happen to the Youngers when they move to that neighborhood. But that's not the driving question for me anymore. Now, it is, "What does it say about the Younger family if they *don't* move to that neighborhood?" What does it say about Walter Lee if he doesn't try to go for his dreams, or Beneatha, if she doesn't try to be a doctor? That's the question we have to ask ourselves as Americans right now. What does it say about us if we don't fight, even when we know we're going to be uncomfortable? You gotta do something. If you don't fight, the status quo prevails.

As much as I love this play, I can't wait for some of its themes to be outdated. But there's a silver lining around that. What Lorraine Hansberry has given us in this beautiful play is a way to find courage within ourselves, and a complete understanding that we all have the same hopes and dreams.