

Reed Birney and Son Ephraim on Acting Together for the First Time

The father and son duo are performing in Joseph Dougherty's historic two-hander this summer in West Virginia, and learn a lot about each other in the process. [Print](#)

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It's 1944 and Chester Bailey wants to enlist in World War II. Instead, his parents find him a job at the Brooklyn Navy Yards that will allow him to play his part without crossing the ocean. A devastating workplace assault renders Chester blind and without hands—but he doesn't see it that way.

His spirited imagination and unwavering denial of his injuries lands him in a Long Island mental facility. Psychologist Doctor Philip Cotton is assigned to Bailey to administer a dose of reality. In the process, he becomes protective of the young man and bolsters his creative mind.

That remarkable story is the basis for *Chester Bailey* by Joseph Dougherty, which is currently having its second production at [Contemporary American Theater Festival](#) (CATF) in Shepherdstown, W. Va., through July 28. And it stars Tony-winning actor Reed Birney and his son Ephraim as Doctor Cotton and Chester Bailey, respectively (the entire Birney family are performers; Reed's wife Constance Shulman and daughter Gus are also actors).

Below, the father-son duo talk about sharing the stage together for the first time in Dougherty's intense two-hander.

ALLISON CONSIDINE: CATF's artistic director Ed Herendeen really does select gut-punching, edgy works for the annual summer season. *Chester Bailey* certainly falls into that category. What drew you to this harrowing play?

REED BIRNEY: Right? It's unrelenting. I think both of us were sort of caught off guard about this whole thing—working together and spending time away. I'm so struck by how detailed the play is emotionally and in terms of the period. The language is so effortlessly beautiful. The challenge is making it sound like real speech and still honoring the beauty of the language. And the lines, even though there are 10 million of them, are fairly easy to remember because they are written so smartly.

EPHRAIM BIRNEY: I think what really got me interested was finding how Joseph finds the logic and the physics, for lack of a better word, of Chester's world and how he goes about explaining things to himself. And the beauty of Chester describing the bedroom and dancing—these little, tiny things that we take for granted in day to day life.

REED: And so, when he loses that world, he's able to create them again with just his mind, which is very moving to me. It's impressive to me how he has a character like Chester, who is from Brooklyn and pretty simple, but Joseph has found real poetry in the way Chester speaks compared to the way Doctor Cotton speaks. They each have their own voice. I think lots of times, in plays where language is front and center, everybody sounds the same. He's really found a way to make us sound very different and still in the same world.

The play has a lot of long monologues. There is very little dialogue shared with Dr. Cotton and Chester Bailey. What were the challenges in working with the play's structure?

EPHRAIM: Starting it even now is still intimidating. You don't really feel like the play has started, at least for us, until maybe 10 pages into the script. It almost becomes like a weird memory game. If I throw one thing off then he's off balance.

REED: Nothing Ephraim says helps me with what my next line is. So in rehearsal there was a lot of skipping. Once I knew what the first couple of words to the speech were I could say the speech, but remembering which speech came next was the challenge. You skip one speech and then we're out of sync and nobody knows how to get back. I mean, God help us if that ever actually happens. We'll just have to stop and everybody goes home!

What were some of the things that you learned from each other throughout this experience?

EPHRAIM: I was really scared, I'll tell you. you think about working with someone who is as accomplished and has been in this business as long as my dad has been is already intimidating, and then you realize that you're throwing punches at your dad at the latter half of this play and you're rolling around on the floor and you're like, 'Okay, well this is my nightmare.' We really let each other have our own kind of journey with this, which was a lot

simpler and easier than I thought it was going to be.

REED: Yeah, I agree. I was worried about all that stuff too: What would it be like to be in the rehearsal room with somebody in your family. But it became clear very quickly that Ephraim was an acting colleague in the room way more than my son. I was excited about was how good he was, and how professional he was, and how hard-working he was. And how smart he was about the part. So, it was a lot of fun and I'm not sure either of us expected it to be as much fun, in the room, as it was.

So back to that fight scene, Chester is blind and initiates a physical fight with Dr. Cotton in the hospital room. What were the challenges in preparing that sequence?

EPHRAIM: That was constantly evolving and changing practically up until opening night. It was interesting getting over the initial hurdle of making this not look like it's a big fake-y fake fight, and 'Oh, I'm missing punches on purpose, and what do my hands do during this?' I think it's really emotional and a little moving; The fact that so much of this fight is me just trying to find where he is in the room, because a lot of those punches and swipes that I'm throwing are not even so much about hurting him as they are about finding him.

REED: I think we both have a fear of stage combat that looks so fake, and that we were pretty clear with the fight director and the director that whatever we come up with needs to look real and not stagey. So, that was a real primary concern and I think we've done pretty well.

EPHRAIM: You can tell us more about what it looks like.

I thought it was pretty convincing! Even though you were both only cast in *Chester Bailey*, what were some of the challenges of being part of CATF's six-play repertory?

REED: The most obvious is that we had to keep interrupting our tech so that the other play could have the stage. And, that was frustrating.

EPHRAIM: It was a very odd process. You'd be onstage and running lights and sound, and you'd feel very in it, and then you'd go a day and a half without ever seeing it again.

REED: That was the biggest challenge—that we didn't get a dedicated, solid amount of tech to get ready. That was quite terrifying too because we were unsure about some of the things.

Chester's parents do not let him enlist in the war, and a chain reaction of horrid events happen as a result. It was powerful to then think that onstage in real life, here's this family who's fully supporting each other and letting them do what they want to do.

EPHRAIM: Yeah. You guys would let me go to war! [*Laughs*]

REED: It's been a remarkable experience, obviously. I think it's something that Ephraim and I will remember forever. It's unusual to have a family where all four of us are actors to begin with. But, then to have something like this, a two-hander.... It's been unforgettable on so many levels.