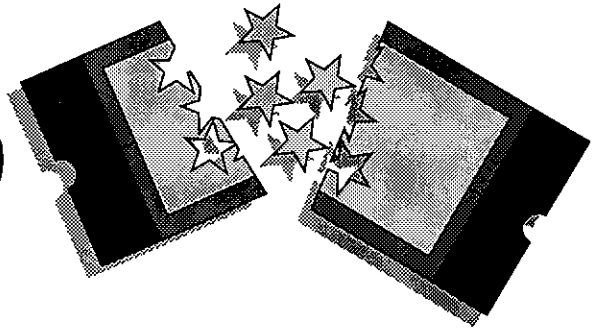


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A Raisin in the Sun



INDIANA REPERTORY THEATRE
140 WEST WASHINGTON STREET
INDIANAPOLIS, INDIANA 46204
LIBBY APPEL, ARTISTIC DIRECTOR

by Lorraine Hansberry
September 27 through November 6, 1994

LORRAINE HANSBERRY

Young, Gifted, and Black

BY JENNIFER J. HASKIN

As a dramatist, film and television scriptwriter, novelist, poet, and essayist, she was among the greatest celebrators of the black spirit as well as one of the sharpest intellects and keenest observers of her time.

While Lorraine Hansberry accomplished a great deal for African-American people in the arena of theatre and civil rights, her work has universal appeal: since its Broadway debut, *A Raisin in the Sun* has been translated into over thirty languages and has been produced in such culturally diverse places as China, Czechoslovakia, England, France, and the former Soviet Union, as well as throughout the United States.

Lorraine Vivian Hansberry was born in Chicago in 1930, the youngest of four children. Her father's shrewd investments kept the family prosperous throughout the Depression. Although she was surrounded by black politics, culture, and economics throughout her childhood, Lorraine attended a legally segregated grade school—not because her parents couldn't afford to send her to a private school, but because, as she put it, "they didn't believe in it." The Hansberry library featured a wealth of works by black writers as well as world classics, and by the time she was ten, Lorraine had chosen Toussaint L'Ouverture (the Haitian revolutionary leader) and Hannibal (a black explorer) as her "heroes," and Pearl S. Buck as her favorite writer. Leo Hansberry, her uncle, was a distinguished Africanist at Howard University. He often visited their home, as did other

significant black figures such as Paul Robeson, Duke Ellington, Langston Hughes, Walter White, Joe Louis, and Jessie Owens.

Never comfortable with her "rich girl" status (the Hansberrys were actually upper middle class, but they were considered rich by their poor neighbors), Lorraine often identified with the maturity, pride, independence, and determination of poorer children. Many were "latchkey kids"—their parents worked, so the children had to care for themselves after school—and they wore their housekeys around their necks. Hoping to be accepted as one of them, Lorraine too wore keys, any keys she could find, including skate keys.

Lorraine's father, Carl Hansberry, was a prosperous real estate broker and founded the first Negro bank in Chicago. When he moved the family into an all-white neighborhood in 1938, restricted covenants (laws which prevented blacks from living in white neighborhoods) were enforced, and Hansberry filed a civil rights suit. He fought the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where he won; sadly, the victory had minimal effects over restricted covenants. During this ordeal, the family was denied police protection, and they lived under siege from hostile neighbors: a brick thrown through a window narrowly missed hitting the 8-year old Lorraine; her mother patrolled the house at night with a gun to ensure the family's safety. Such memories were no doubt instrumental as Lorraine later wrote of a black family's courageous decision to move into a hostile new environment in *A Raisin in the Sun*. The first draft
(continued on next page)



On the eve of the opening of *A Raisin in the Sun*, 29-year-old Lorraine Hansberry wrote these words in a letter to her mother:

"Mama, it is a play that tells the truth about people, Negroes and life and I think it will help a lot of people to understand how we are just as complicated as they are—and just as mixed up—but above all, that we have among our miserable and downtrodden ranks—people who are the very essence of human dignity. That is what, after all the laughter and tears, the play is supposed to say. I hope it will make you very proud."

(continued from front page)

of *Raisin* concludes with the black family sitting in the dark, armed, awaiting an attack by hostile whites.

In 1948, Lorraine enrolled in the University of Wisconsin, studying art, literature, drama, and stage design. (Subsequent critics have noted that Hansberry's drawings and sketches are almost as noteworthy as her writing.) Two years later, she left school and moved to New York City "to seek an education of a different kind." She became involved in early civil rights activities while writing for various magazines and holding a succession of jobs. While on a picket line protesting discrimination at New York University, she met Robert Nemiroff, an aspiring songwriter and producer, whom she married in 1953.

Believing the best contribution she could make to the cause of civil rights was through writing, she began to concentrate on her creative efforts. She worked on three uncompleted plays, an unfinished semi-autobiographical novel, and an opera. One source of motivation was an experience she recounted for the *New York Times*: "One night after seeing a play I won't mention, I suddenly became disgusted with a whole body of material about Negroes. Cardboard characters. Cute dialect bits. Or hip-swinging musicals from exotic scores." The result of her anger would become the first Broadway play by a black woman, and the longest running black play up to that

point in Broadway's history.

She completed *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1957, but the struggle to produce a black play by an unknown black woman took two years. When it finally opened on Broadway on March 11, 1959, Hansberry's drama drew many favorable reviews and began a highly successful run of

538 performances. Its success was confirmed when Hansberry won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, making her at age 29 the youngest American, the fifth woman, and the first black ever to win the prestigious award.

In 1960, she wrote two screenplays of *Raisin* which expanded on the play's themes, but both were rejected by Columbia Pictures as too racially controversial. A third draft, closer to the stage version, was finally accepted. She also began research for an opera, *Toussaint*.

She continued to work on plays while rallying support for the Student Non-violent Coordination Committee (SNCC) in its struggle against southern segregation. She also joined James Baldwin, other prominent blacks, and a

few whites in 1963 at a widely publicized meeting on racial crisis with Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

While working on her second Broadway play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, Hansberry learned she had cancer. Fighting the illness, she stayed active in politics and writing while enduring numerous operations. Despite brief remissions, she died on January 12, 1965, at the age of 34. Six hundred people attended her funeral, where Paul Robeson delivered the eulogy.

Even after her death, Hansberry's work continued to flourish and inspire new audiences and artists. A master prose stylist, she had written a wealth of published and unpublished essays on black history, black art, black feminism, the Cuban missile crisis, the Civil Rights Movement, world literature, and existentialism, in addition to her creative work. Her play *Les Blancs* was presented posthumously and won six votes from critics for the Best American Play of 1970. *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, a play based on her autobiographical writings, was the longest running off-Broadway drama of 1969, and was later expanded into book form. *Raisin*, a musical based on *A Raisin in the Sun*, won the Tony Award for Best Musical in 1974.

Hansberry's untimely death left a void in American theatre and in the circle of black writers. In response to America's great loss, Dr. Martin Luther King wrote, "Her commitment of spirit ... her creative literary ability and her profound grasp of the deep social issues confronting the world today will remain an inspiration to generations yet unborn." ★



Claudia McNeil and Sidney Poitier reprised their original Broadway roles as Mama and Walter Lee in the Columbia Pictures production of *A Raisin in the Sun*.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare the treatment of African-Americans in society today vs. the 1950s. What things have changed? What things still need to be changed?
2. What kinds of problems arise from living in a confined space like the Youngers' apartment?
3. Have you ever fought with someone close to you over money, or watched people you care about fight over money?
4. Why does Walter Lee resent Beneatha? Have you ever thought your brother or sister was favored in the family, or have they ever accused you of being the favorite?
5. Have you ever wanted something so badly that you couldn't think about anything else? What stood between you and what you wanted? What did you do?
6. Do you think that where you live has to do with your sense of who you are or in what group you belong? What does the location of your house or apartment say about the kind of people who live in it? Have you ever felt like an outsider in your neighborhood?

● ● ● ● ● Plot and Theme in ● ● ● ● ● A RAISIN IN THE SUN

The play presents three generations of the Younger family. Lena (Mama) has recently lost her husband. She has two children: Walter Lee works as a chauffeur, and Beneatha is a college student. Walter Lee's wife, Ruth, works as a domestic servant, and their son, Travis, is 10 years old. These three generations live in a small, one-bedroom apartment in a ghetto neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago in 1959.

The action of the play focuses on conflicts presented to the Younger family when they receive the deceased father's \$10,000 life insurance check. Mama wants to finance Beneatha's medical school education. Ruth wants to move out of the ghetto to provide a healthier environment for her child and family. Walter Lee wants to invest in a liquor store so that he can stop working as a white man's chauffeur. Their dreams of what the money can do to improve their lives collide, creating tension between the family members and threatening to tear them apart.

Racial prejudice is at the center of this play: Hansberry very accurately and movingly presents the sense of despair and anger the Youngers feel as a result of the degradation experienced every day by blacks in 1950s America. They live in **poverty**, they work in demoralizing jobs, and they have little hope of escaping this cycle. The insurance money provides them with a possible solution; but if financial well-being must be purchased at the expense of **human dignity**, perhaps the price is too high.

Hansberry's play contains both the **past** and the **future** of black life in America. Slavery, the Great Migration (in which blacks moved from the rural South to the industrialized North at the turn of the century), and the resulting struggle for existence in the ghettos are depicted in Lena's life. Lena's deceased husband, Walter Lee Sr., represents **hope** in the play, a hope that has died. The growing **anger** over poverty, lack of opportunity, and ghetto life is depicted in Walter Lee, Jr. Beneatha represents the newest movements in black culture in the 1950s: the rise of **black nationalism** and the **woman's liberation movement**. Ruth's sense of despair is represented in her fear of bringing another child into the world, a world in which subsistence survival is not going to be enough. **Generational respect** is tested and reaffirmed in the play.

Identity is a looming issue in the play: life in the ghetto is depicted as destroying self-esteem through its overcrowding, its lack of privacy and sunlight, its segregation from the mainstream. Walter Lee's identity as a man, the potential head of the household, is undermined by his subservient job and his lack of hope for the future. The struggle to retain **racial pride** despite these degrading circumstances permeates the play. Ultimately, Walter Lee is able, in Hansberry's own words, to reach "that sweet essence which is human dignity, and it shines like the old star-touched dream." ★

Langston Hughes

P O E M S

Renowned black poet Langston Hughes was a frequent visitor in the Southside Chicago home of Lorraine Hansberry's family, and from her childhood, she found eloquence and depth in his work. As a playwright she paid tribute to him in the title of her first play. Its working title was *The Crystal Stair*, but eventually she changed it to *A Raisin in the Sun*.

THE CRYSTAL STAIR

Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time I've been a climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin', honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

from

MONTAGE OF A DREAM DEFERRED

What happens to a dream deferred?
Does it dry up
Like a raisin in the sun?
Or fester like a sore—
And then run?
Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
Like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
Like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

CIVIL RIGHTS IN AMERICA

A Timeline of Events as Seen through the Lifetime of Lorraine Hansberry

Despite the fact that the United States government granted full rights of citizenship to its African-American population in the 1860s through the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments to the Constitution, it was nearly a century before the practices of desegregation were fully outlawed. Lorraine Hansberry was born into a world in which blacks were subject to "Jim Crow" laws—local and state practices which limited the freedoms of blacks and restricted their rights to quality public education, housing, and equal use of public facilities.

This timeline places Hansberry's life in the perspective of the civil rights movement, culminating in the Civil Rights Act enacted by Congress in the same year Hansberry died. What is remarkable about *A Raisin in the Sun* is Hansberry's ability to see into the future: such events as Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech and the inner-city explosions of the 1960s are foreshadowed in Hansberry's play.

★ **1930:** Lorraine Hansberry is born.

★ **1936:** Jesse Owens is the top athlete at the Berlin Olympics, during which Hitler leaves the stands when Negro athletes come forward to receive their medals. Lorraine is 6 years old.

★ **1940:** The U.S. Supreme Court decides in favor of Carl Hansberry, Lorraine's father, in *Hansberry v. Lee*, thus removing racially restrictive real estate covenants. Unfortunately, the victory does little to stop racial discrimination in real estate practices. Lorraine is 10.

★ **1941:** President Roosevelt calls a conference of black leaders and issues an executive order banning discrimination in industries holding government contracts.

★ **1941-42:** The United States Army, Navy, and Marines admit blacks for unsegregated training.

★ **1946:** The Supreme Court strikes down a law in Virginia that requires blacks on an interstate bus to move to the rear to make way for a white passenger. Lorraine Hansberry is 16.

★ **1947:** Jackie Robinson breaks the color

barrier in big league baseball, becoming the first black in the major leagues.

★ **1949:** The Ku Klux Klan, founded in 1866, meets in Montgomery, Alabama, to form a national organization of six Southern states. Intimidation activities and violence escalate through the fifties and sixties, and blacks mobilize to gain the rights granted them through constitutional amendment but never enforced.

★ **1954:** The landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education* brings an end to legal education segregation. Chief Justice Earl Warren declares in his opinion that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The decision compels public schools to accept both black and white students, although in many southern states the ruling is ignored. The governor of Kansas calls out the National Guard to enforce the law. Lorraine Hansberry is 24 years old.

★ **1955:** 14-year-old Emmitt Till, from the South Side of Chicago, is violently murdered by the husband of a female shopkeeper in Mississippi after he allegedly behaves disrespectfully to the woman. Despite witnesses, the husband and his accomplices are found innocent.

★ **1955:** Rosa Parks, a department store seamstress, refuses to give up her seat to a white man on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She is arrested and her action launches the Montgomery Bus Boycott, a 381-day event which results in the Supreme Court order to desegregate the bus system in Montgomery. The young Martin Luther King, Jr., comes forward as a leader in this event.

★ **1955:** Marian Anderson becomes the first black singer at the Metropolitan Opera.

★ **1957:** In a major challenge to *Brown v. the Topeka Board of Education*, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus refuses to allow the integration of the Little Rock schools. It takes a presidential proclamation, the 101st Airborne Division, and the state militia to ensure the safe entrance of 9 black teenagers to the high school.

★ **1959:** *A Raisin in the Sun* opens on Broadway. At the age of 29, Lorraine

Hansberry becomes the youngest playwright, the fifth woman, and the first black dramatist to win the New York Drama Critic's Circle Award.

★ **1960:** The era of sit-ins and "Freedom Rides": all over the South, black youths begin to conduct sit-ins against segregated restaurants, parks, swimming pools, libraries, and theatres, and assert their rights on public transportation, often eliciting violence.

★ **1962:** President Kennedy sends federal troops to the University of Mississippi to ensure the safety of James Meredith, the first black student to enroll in the famous southern school. The riot which ensues leaves two dead, 200 arrested, and dozens of weapons confiscated.

★ **1963:** Civil Rights activist Medgar Evers is assassinated in Jackson, Mississippi, where he has been leading a campaign for fair employment and integration against a stubborn city government. His killer will not be convicted until 1993.

★ **1963:** Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers his famous "I Have a Dream" address at the Lincoln Memorial. Lorraine Hansberry is 33.

★ **1964:** The Civil Rights Act is passed in Congress aimed at ending discrimination against blacks and other minority groups. The law provides measures to ensure equal rights for all Americans to vote, to work, and to use public accommodations, public education, and programs receiving federal funding.

★ **1965:** On January 12, Lorraine Hansberry dies of cancer at the age of 34. ★

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