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The Making of A Raisin in the Sun

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The Making of *A Raisin in the Sun*, commissioned by the Lorraine Hansberry Documentary Project as supplemental materials to accompany the 2018 PBS/American Experience broadcast of *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart: Lorraine Hansberry*

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Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the S*un premiered on the Broadway stage in January 1959 just as the edifice of national segregation was cracking open. Response to the momentous 1954 Supreme Court decision in <u>Brown v. Bd. of Education</u> included both the important early challenges to long-accepted practices of white supremacy <u>and</u> the intensified mobilization of widespread white defiance to the ruling. Black Bus boycotters in Montgomery, Alabama, and their young minister leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Black high school students attempting to attend Little Rock's Central High and their families faced organized harassment and dangerous forms of assault. The play's immediate success then and since has made it one of the most well-known and frequently produced dramas of the twentieth century.

How did a play with richly imagined and multi-faceted Black characters, written by a young and unknown Black woman playwright, directed by an unknown Black director, Lloyd Richards, who worked as an acting coach, break into Broadway and twentieth century history? Two inexperienced producers tried to find backers, but the usual theatrical investors weren't interested: "Too bad it isn't a musical. White audiences aren't interested in a Negro play." Although this was Southside Chicago-born Hansberry's first completed play, she had been living, working, and writing in New York for nearly a decade, where she involved herself in radical politics. Many of her friends and associates, including white Jewish Communist Robert Nemiroff, whom she married in 1953, were part of New York's Black and interracial arts left, committed to promoting Black arts and culture as central tools in the struggle for social justice. They immediately recognized the audacity and profound relevance of Hansberry's play, and they did whatever they could to get this work to the public—they provided many of the small donations that ultimately financed the unlikely production, some collected at benefit readings where attendees passed the hat.

A familiar plot device--family conflict over how to spend a windfall insurance check--provided a lens through which Hansberry could represent Black historical and generational change in confronting racial barriers. As Hansberry told one Black New York journalist, "The thing I tried to show was the many gradations in even one Negro family, the clash of the old and the new, but most of all, the unbelievable courage of the Negro people." *Raisin*'s characters included Mama as a deceptively familiar hard-working domestic worker /family matriarch who turns out to also be a risk-taking radical; her daughter Beneatha, a college student who claims the right to selfhood and meaningful work outside of marriage; her son Walter Lee as an angry young man embittered by failed promises of "making it" in white society who ultimately commits to collective resistance; and Asagai, an African student who links the Southside Black community to the momentum of the new African independence movements.

News about what was happening on stage in *Raisin* encouraged an unprecedented number of first-time Black theatergoers to join the primarily white Broadway audience. Reviewers noted hushed silences, tumultuous ovations, and raucous laughter mixing with tears. Black and white audience members listening to expressions of racial anger mixed with the self-mocking humor of the dispossessed in one another's presence turned the theater into a rare interracial public sphere. *Raisin*'s exploration of complex male and female working-class Black interior lives encouraged other Black artists to experiment with theatrical storytelling, and travelling and community productions of the play created debut theatrical opportunities for generations of African American actors.

Even as it thrilled audiences, the play generated controversy. *Raisin's* alternative vision of change emanated from Black working-class family solidarity, African American labor, and worldwide anticolonial agitation. Many Black reviewers recognized and applauded the play's critique of the materialistic and imperial aspirations of American victory culture after WWII. Some questioned the sexual dynamics on stage, feeling that Mama's dominance overwhelmed Walter Lee's oppositional stance. Others discounted family drama as contaminated by the "overworked formulas" of domestic soap operas, and as limited by representing the "aspirations of the new rising Negro mercantile class." The dissenting poet and emerging Black Arts proponent LeRoi Jones, who would soon rename himself as Amiri Baraka, was concerned that Hansberry 's play had appeal only "for the American middleclass."

Much of the national media commentary praised Hansberry's play in terms that missed or muddied its racial protest. Some white critics ignored the play's exposure of exclusionary race-based barriers by keeping their focus on the ending, which they understood as the family's triumphant escape from the desolation of the Black ghetto into their own house in a white neighborhood ("their dreams as those of any minority group living under pressure and bursting with the urge to better their condition.") These critics denied Black experience. Over and over the press described *Raisin* as "not a Negro play but a play about people who happened to be Negroes," and identified Hansberry herself as "not a Negro playwright but a writer who happened to be black." Hansberry's characters were kidnapped and pressed into service to promote white conceptions of an imagined color-blind universality; one of the weekly magazines touted *Raisin* as "a touching story about a tenement family and their vanishing dream."

Raisin's success on Broadway was a personal triumph for Hansberry, and a quiet vindication for her black and white left-wing arts associates, silenced and pushed out of sight by years of anti-Communist political mobilization and legal threats associated with McCarthyism. After the play was awarded a "best drama" prize, mainstream press headlines identified the twenty-nine year old playwright as a "housewife" and as a "Negro girl." Hansberry seized the spotlight to challenge white ignorance of black lives. She insisted on the significance of the play's setting in the South Side of Chicago. She emphasized the costs of living in a racist society, pointing out that "the ghettos are killing us," and she warned of the real dangers accompanying the Younger family's move into a hostile white neighborhood. She framed "integration" <u>not</u> as assimilation into white institutions, but rather as removing <u>all</u> barriers confronting working people, Black and white. Like her friend James Baldwin, she was explicitly critical of "the void racism has left in the character of white Americans." Rather than striving to enter the white man's house, she argued that "the Negro people would like to see this house rebuilt." She often invoked the inspired "rebuilding" represented by the emergence of independent African nations: "One of the reasons I feel so free is because I belong to a world majority, and a very assertive one."

Hansberry took advantage of her new access to the press and broadcast media to celebrate black culture, proudly declaring that "the destiny of the African people and twenty million American Negroes are inextricably and magnificently bound together forever." Denying Black cultural heritage, she wrote, produced the cultural starvation of Black children, an emotionally costly "historical and cultural obliteration" when "Europe becomes the world, " and the "Grace Kelly-Marilyn Monroe monotyped 'ideal' [was] imposed on the national culture" in advertising, movies, television, and popular fiction. Still, the widespread reading of her play was a brief for integration, creating a lasting image of Hansberry as an integrationist.

Hansberry had finally been in a position to concentrate on her writing and work out the construction of her prize-winning play because a surprising windfall, royalties from Robert Nemiroff's successful co-authoring a popular song, had enabled her to quit all her part-time jobs. While she was writing her play, she had separated from Nemiroff, in part because she had discovered her own sexual desires for women, and had begun to act on them. In the spring and summer of 1957, she wrote to the lesbian publication *The Ladder*, analyzing her dilemmas as "married lesbian," and hypothesizing a conceptual link between "anti-feminist dogma" and the social condemnation of homosexuality. After they no longer lived together, Nemiroff remained devoted to Hansberry. He and she collaborated in keeping the dissolution of their marriage out of the public eye, perhaps as a means of protecting her voice as a Black radical social critic and her literary authority from the inevitable and vicious political and personal attacks targeting homosexuals in this period. Hansberry's writing includes lesbian fiction published under a pseudonym. Other published and unpublished essays and reviews show her insistently trying to work out the complex relationship between the conditions driving "the race question" and "the woman question."

In the early years of the 1960s, Hansberry spoke out frequently in support of the militant demand "freedom now," rejecting gradualism for black liberation. But by the time Hansberry died in 1965, new articulations of Black Power, Black Arts, and Black nationalism made Hansberry's race radicalism and *Raisin* seem not black enough. The Black social critic and writer Harold Cruse sneered at Hansberry as hopelessly bourgeois and discounted *Raisin* as presenting Black life through a quasi-white orientation in his 1967 book, *the Crisis of the Black Intellectual*, widely assigned in black studies courses. By 1988, *Raisin* had become exhibit number one in George Wolfe's *Colored Museum* (1988), satirized as "the Last Mama on the Couch Play."

In recent years*, Raisin* escaped from the museum. Two successful Broadway revivals (2004; 2014) garnered new awards and excited new audiences. Young playwrights have revisited its themes in new plays: *Neighbors* (2010); *Clybourne* Park (2010; *The Luck of the Irish* (2012) and *Beneatha's* Place (2013). In 2018, when a new wave of protesters cry out that "Black Lives Matter" and "Women's Place is In the Resistance," Tracy Heather Strain's film, <u>Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart: Lorraine Hansberry</u>, reclaims Hansberry as artist, activist, rebel, visionary who speaks powerfully to our current condition.