

A Raisin in the Sun

Theatre USA will present Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. This powerful story of an American family will be staged by Dr. Matt Ames, with Scenic and Lighting design by Lyle B. Miller and Costume design by Maura Odom, February 26, 27, 28 and March 1 at 8:00 p.m. and Sunday February 29 at 2:00 p.m. in the Laidlaw Performing Arts Center, located on the campus of the University of South

Forty years ago, *A Raisin in the Sun* made history as the first play written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway. Forty years later, it is hailed as a classic of 20th century drama, a play grounded in its own time that speaks through the years to our own. This classic African-American masterpiece tells the story of the Younger family and their struggle for a better life.

Lorraine Hansberry's classic drama involves three generations of one family living, fighting and struggling together under one roof. The Youngers—Mama, her children Beneatha and Walter Lee, and his wife Ruth and their son, Travis—are poor, black and living on Chicago's South Side in the 1950s. It is a place in which dreams, like the raisin in the Langston Hughes' poem from which the play takes its title, wither and die if nothing is done with them.

Mr. Younger died some months past, and an insurance policy check for \$10,000 is on its way. What dream will that money buy? Part ownership in a liquor store for Walter Lee? Tuition to medical school for Beneatha? A home where Ruth does not have to defer to Mama and where Travis can have a room of his own? A house in a better neighborhood for all?

Mama buys the house but is strongly encouraged to sell it before the family even moves in because they will be the only black family in a white neighborhood. It turns out, they may not get the house after all, because Walter Lee has taken the money Mama entrusted to him, and lost it to a con man. The loss sends the Youngers on a painful journey, in which they all find out surprising things about themselves, about love, courage, honor and family. At the end, we don't know exactly where the Youngers will end up, but there is good reason to believe that, wherever they do, it will be a better place than where they were.



Lorraine Hansberry

was born in Chicago as the daughter of a prominent real-estate broker, Carl Hansberry, and the niece of William Leo Hansberry, a Howard University professor of African history in D.C. Hansberry's parents were intellectuals and activists. Her father was an active member of the Republican Party. He won an

antisegregation case before the Illinois Supreme Court, upon which the events in *A Raisin in the Sun* was loosely based. When Lorraine was eight, her parents bought a house in a white neighborhood, where they were welcomed one night by a racist mob. Their experience of discrimination there led to the civil rights case.

Hansberry's parents sent her to public schools rather than private ones as a protest against the segregation laws. She studied art at the University of Wisconsin and in Mexico. In Wisconsin she joined the Young Progressives of America and later the Labor Youth League. After attending a school performance of a play by the Irish playwright Sean O'Casey, she decided to become a writer. In 1950 she dropped out of college and moved to New York. During this period she met the famous writer Langston Hughes.

In 1953 Hansberry married Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish literature student and songwriter, whom she had met on a picket line protesting discrimination at New York University. She worked as a waitress and

cashier, writing in her spare time. After Nemiroff gained success with his hit song, 'Cindy, Oh Cindy', Hansberry could devote herself entirely to writing. The working title of "A Raisin in the Sun" was 'The Crystal Stair' after a line in a poem by Langston Hughes. The new title was also from a Langston Hughes's poem, "Harlem". The play gained a huge success although the producer,

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SET AT THE BEGINNING OF THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, A RAISIN IN THE SUN SEEKS ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS POSED IN LANGSTON HUGHES' POEM, HARLEM: WHAT HAPPENS TO A DREAM DEFERRED?



*GIRL "READING" EBONY MAGAZINE
PHOTOGRAPH BY WAYNE F. MILLER*

Artist Spotlight Costume Designer Maura Odom

When asked how she decided she wanted to be a Costume and Makeup Designer, junior Maura Odom quickly replied, “I’m crazy!..... No don’t print that!”

She went on to say she always loved to draw, loved to paint “But I didn’t think I could do anything with my Art, not unless I was living in a trailer on a beach somewhere on the bay. So, I thought I was going to be a doctor or a medical researcher.”

That led her to initially start college on a pre-med tract. But her heart wasn’t in it. She found herself talking to teachers about how to incorporate her art into a medical career. She considered doing medical illustrations, but that wasn’t creative enough.

“My grandmother and mother convinced me to do something that made me happy, not what made other people happy. So I looked around at different careers that involved art and eventually found Theatrical Design. As I said I loved to draw and paint. Well, Makeup is painting on faces and I’ve always loved clothes which took me to Costume Design. So, here I am!”

Her first project was creating the period shoes for Theatre USA’s production of *The Rivals*. “I got to recreate these 18th c. shoes by glueing, sewing and making a mess. I even glued myself to the counter once. But they turned out good. I thought, this is Great! What’s next?”

Next was Makeup Design for *Cabaret*. I sat in the audience and thought “Wow I painted that on a piece of paper and now it’s on their faces. It was like I kind of helped the actor make the character who they were.” Next was designing costumes for two of the Second Stage student directed shows, *Brilliant Traces* and *We Have Always Lived In The Castle* and then Makeup Design for last Fall’s *Brighton Beach Memoirs* and *The Reluctant Dragon*. *Raisin In The Sun* is her first main stage Costume Design.

Originally from Mobile, she attended Corpus Christi and then McGill High School. What are her plans after she finishes her B.F.A. in Theatre Design and Technology? “I’m not sure yet. Maybe Graduate School, or straight to looking for work either in Los Angeles or New York. Depending on the day I get a different plan. But I still have a couple of semesters to decide. First it’s going to the Southeastern Theatre Conference and finding a job for this summer. Then I’ll see what happens next!”

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Phil Rose, had never produced a play, and large investors were not interested in it. The production was first taken out of New York and played in New Haven, Philadelphia, and Chicago. In all places audiences loved it. It opened in New York at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, on March 11, 1959 where it ran 530 performances.

Hansberry’s success was shadowed by accusations that her family were slumlords on Chicago’s South Side. To escape the bad publicity, her family moved to Los Angeles. Hansberry also had marital problems resulting in a divorce from Nemiroff in 1964. Hansberry’s next produced play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* (1964), was set in the New York City neighborhood of Greenwich Village, where she had long made her home. The play had only modest success on Broadway.



ONE-ROOM KITCHENETTE PHOTOGRAPHY BY WAYNE F. MILLER

By the time *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window* opened, Hansberry had been diagnosed with cancer spending much time in hospitals, often needing a wheelchair to get to and from rehearsals. Lorraine Hansberry died of cancer on January 12, 1965. *To be Young, Gifted, and Black*, was adapted from her writings and produced Off-Broadway in 1969. It also appeared in book form next year.

Hansberry had started *Les Blancs*, a drama set in Africa, in 1960, and in 1961 it started to find its shape, although she wrote a number of drafts for it. After her death her ex-husband Robert Nemiroff continued the work as her literary executor and completed a preliminary draft in 1966. It was first presented by Konrad Matthaei at the Longacre Theatre, New York City, November 15, 1970.

In 1973, Neminoff and Charlotte Zaltzberg adapted Hansberry’s first play into a musical, entitled *Raisin*, with music composed by Judd Woldin. *Raisin* won the Tony Award as the best musical and ran on Broadway for nearly three years. It was revived in 1981.

Deeply committed to the Black struggle for equality and human rights, Lorraine Hansberry’s brilliant career as a writer was cut short by her death when she was only 35. Her purpose in writing *A Raisin in the Sun* was to show “the many gradations in even one Negro family.” The characters suffer, hope, dream, and triumph over the enormous barriers erected by the dominant culture. Not only was *A Raisin in the Sun* the first play written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway, it won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award making Hansberry the youngest and the first black writer to receive this award.

Hansberry herself dedicated the play “*To Mama: in gratitude for the dream*” a note which goes far to explain Lena Younger in this play.

Two days before the first performance of *A Raisin In the Sun* in New Haven, Hansberry wrote 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.”

Notes from Director Matt Ames

For a Director, Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun* is an easy piece of material with which to work. It is so well written, so well constructed, that a director can concentrate on developing

the acting performances to make a production fly. There is really very little need for the "concepts" or stage trickery sometimes required to dress up a flawed text, to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear. *Raisin* is already a silk purse. As a result, in our production here at South Alabama, we have made very few alterations to the original notions of the script and the concepts that drove the first production.

While *Raisin* is really a play about people, about a specific family and the way they interact, it is also a play about a place and a time, about ideas. The Youngers live in a very small space, an apartment chopped out of another larger apartment in the urban Chicago of the 1950s. They don't have their own bathroom but share one down the hall with other tenants. Indeed, three generations of the Younger family, Mama Lena, her two children, her daughter-in-law, and her grandson all live in what is essentially three rooms, with grandson Travis consigned to the fold-out couch as his bedroom. As such, we wanted any concept in design or approach to the text to reflect this unpleasant state of affairs. We also wanted to portray a sense of the world in which the Youngers live, the world outside their tiny living space. Without giving away too much, let me say that we decided not to use a traditional "box" set, in order for the audience to see more of the Youngers world than just their three rooms.

In terms of its ideas, *Raisin* (written in the early 1950s and reflective of Hansberry's own experiences growing up) anticipates, among other things, the internal strife of the civil rights era, the debate among African-Americans over assimilationism and preservation of African heritage, and the effort of urban African-Americans to determine and achieve their American dreams. Perhaps unknowingly, Hansberry addressed conflicts and problems in her own family's life that would soon become national issues, speaking to universalities of experience that would serve to make the play an American classic and a viable, vital candidate for production now fifty years later.

The sets, lights and costumes wonderfully support the ideas of our production here at South Alabama, but they are not the primary focus of the production as a whole. The text of *Raisin* is realistic in nature, and the success or failure of any production must necessarily lie with the quality of the acting. The "concept" that truly drives South Alabama's "approach" to Hansberry's text is that the characters of the play should be as fully fleshed out as possible, as real and human as our team of young actors and actresses can make them. Fortunately, South Alabama's Dramatic Arts Department is blessed with a number of talented African-American actors amongst its student body (*Raisin*'s cast of characters is primarily African-American) and we felt that at this point in their development, they were ready to handle



TENEMENT BACK PORCH PHOTOGRAPH BY WAYNE F. MILLER

Interviewer: The question, I'm sure, is asked you many times — you must be tired of it — someone comes up to you and says: "This is not really a Negro play; this could be about anybody! It's a play about people!" What is your reaction? What do you say?

Hansberry: Well[,] I hadn't noticed the contradiction because I'd always been under the impression that Negroes are people.... One of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific.

characters as iconographic as Mama and Walter Lee Younger. Above all else, it is the story of regular people, regular Americans and their ongoing effort to improve their lives, and our effort, our "concept," if you will, is to bring the Younger's struggle home to you, to make that struggle identifiable and resonant for the audience of today.

Raisin in the Sun Cast

Walter Lee Younger	Robert Wells
Joseph Asagai.	Jameel Lewis
George Murchison	Douglas Cook
Bobo	Robert Tucker
Travis Younger	Scherman Arnold
Karl Lindner	Paul Thomas
Lena (Mama) Younger	Margarette Joyner
Beneatha Younger	Erin Cadet
Ruth Younger	Natasha Tucker

TICKET & BOX OFFICE INFORMATION PHONE (251-460-6306)

Tickets for Theatre USA's Production of *A Raisin in the Sun*
General Admission \$10.00 Students * \$7.00

The Box Office will be open Monday through Friday from 10:00 am till 6:00 pm Starting Monday Feb. 16 and one hour before each performance.

The Box Office is located in the lobby of the Laidlaw Performing Arts Center on the main campus of The University of South Alabama. Tickets are sold on a first come first served basis. All seats reserved. All sales final. No refund or exchange.

*Student tickets available for all students with valid ID.

One ticket per ID.



The Department of Dramatic Arts
 University of South Alabama
 PAC 1052
 309 North University Blvd.,
 Mobile, Alabama 36688-0002

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Lorraine Hansberry's

A Raisin in the Sun

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 a rotten meat?
 Or crust and sugar over—
 Like a syrupy sweet?
 Maybe it just sags
 Like a heavy load.
 Or does it explode?
 —Langston Hughes

February 26, through March 1
 Laidlaw Performing Arts Center
 Ticket Information (251) 460-6306

Theatre USA