Chancellor’s Reading Club Selection for 2015

A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry
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Lorraine Hansberry


The following guide contains a compilation of information about the play, A Raisin in the Sun by Lorraine Hansberry. Links and full-text are provided to critical reviews of the play and movie versions; and a brief biography and overview of the play. The Literature Resource Center by Gale is the source for these documents. This material is copyrighted and compiled for educational use. Appropriate credit should be given if the material is utilized and an identified citation style (MLA, Chicago, Turabian, APA, etc.) should be used to document any work used in papers assignments or presentations. If you have any questions about this guide, please contact Jan Whitfield by email at jwhitfield@uncfsu.edu or by phone at 910-672-1750.

INTRODUCTION

by Robert Nemiroff

This is the most complete edition of A Raisin in the Sun ever published. Like the American Playhouse production for television, it restores to the play two scenes unknown to the general public, and a number of other key scenes and passages staged for the first time in twenty-fifth anniversary revivals and, most notably, the Roundabout Theatre’s Kennedy Center production on which the television picture is based.

“The events of every passing year add resonance to A Raisin in the Sun. It is as if history is conspiring to make the play a classic”; “... one of a handful of great American dramas ... A Raisin in the Sun belongs in the inner circle, along with Death of a Salesman, Long Day’s Journey into Night, and The Glass Menagerie.” So wrote The New York Times and the Washington Post respectively of Harold Scott’s revelatory stagings for the Roundabout in which most of these elements, cut on Broadway, were restored. The unprecedented resurgence of the work (a dozen regional revivals at this writing, new publications and productions abroad, and now the television production that will be seen by millions) prompts the new edition.

Produced in 1959, the play presaged the revolution in black and women’s consciousness—and the revolutionary ferment in Africa—that exploded in the years following the playwright’s death in 1965 to ineradicably alter the social fabric and consciousness of the nation and the world. As
Lorraine (Vivian) Hansberry

Born: May 19, 1930 in Chicago, Illinois, United States

Died: January 12, 1965 in New York City, New York, United States

Other Names : Hansberry, Lorraine Vivian

Nationality: American

Occupation: Playwright

Contemporary Literary Criticism Select. Detroit: Gale. From Literature Resource Center.

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Table of Contents

Introduction

The first African American and the youngest woman to win the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Hansberry is best known for her play A Raisin in the Sun (1959). The story of a black working-class family and their decision to move into a white neighborhood, A Raisin in the Sun helped pioneer the acceptance of
black drama by Broadway producers and audiences. Although dismissed by some militant blacks as assimilationist, *A Raisin in the Sun* nevertheless garnered praise for its sensitive and revealing portrait of a black family in America. Anne Cheney observed: "A moving testament to the strength and endurance of the human spirit, *A Raisin in the Sun* is a quiet celebration of the black family, the importance of African roots, the equality of women, the vulnerability of marriage, the true value of money, the survival of the individual, and the nature of man's dreams. A well-made play, *Raisin* at first seems a plea for racial tolerance or a fable of man's overcoming an insensitive society, but the simple eloquence of the characters elevates the play into a universal representation of all people's hopes, fears, and dreams."

**Biographical Information**

Hansberry was born into a middle-class family on Chicago's south side in 1930. She recalled that her childhood was basically a happy one: "[The] insulation of life within the Southside ghetto, of what must have easily been half a million people, protected me from some of the harsher and more bestial aspects of white-supremacist culture." At the age of seven or eight, Hansberry and her family moved into a restricted white neighborhood, deliberately violating the city's "covenant laws" that legally sanctioned housing discrimination. When ordered to abide by the law, Hansberry's family, with the help of the NAACP, took their case to the Illinois Supreme Court, which struck down the legislation as unconstitutional. During litigation, white neighbors continually harassed the Hansberry family; in one incident, a brick thrown through their living room window barely missed Hansberry's head. "Lorraine's character and personality were forged in this atmosphere of resistance to injustice," observed Porter Kirkwood. "Both of my parents were strong-minded, civic-minded, exceptionally race-minded people who made enormous sacrifices in behalf of the struggle for civil rights throughout their lifetimes," Hansberry herself recalled.

Hansberry became interested in the theater while still in high school. "Mine was the same old story--" she recollected, "sort of hanging around little acting groups and developing the feeling that the theater embraces everything I liked all at one time." Hansberry attended the University of Wisconsin, where she became further acquainted with great theater, studying the works of August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen, and *Sean O'Casey*. She studied painting in Chicago and abroad for a time but moved to New York City in 1950 to begin her career as a writer.

Politically active in New York, Hansberry wrote for Paul Robeson's *Freedom* magazine and participated in various liberal crusades. During a protest at New York University, she met Robert Nemiroff, a white writer and himself a pursuer of liberal politics. A romance developed, and in 1953 they married. Nemiroff encouraged Hansberry in her writing efforts, going so far as to salvage her discarded pages from the wastebasket. One night in 1957, while the couple was entertaining a group of friends, they read a scene from Hansberry's play in progress, *A Raisin in the Sun*. The impact left by the reading prompted Hansberry, Nemiroff, and friends to push for the completion, financing, and production of the drama within the next several months.

**Major Works**

Enjoying solid success at tryout performances on the road, *A Raisin in the Sun* made its New York debut in March 1959 at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre. It was the first play written by a black woman to be produced on Broadway and the first to be directed by a black director in more than fifty years. When *A Raisin in the Sun* won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award, Hansberry became the youngest writer and the first black artist ever to receive the honor, competing that year with such theater luminaries as *Tennessee Williams*, Eugene O'Neill, and Archibald MacLeish. In June 1959 Hansberry was named the "most promising playwright" of the season by *Variety*'s poll of New York drama critics.

Hansberry originally named her play *The Crystal Stair* after a line in the *Langston Hughes* poem "Mother to Son," but she later changed its title to *A Raisin in the Sun*, an image taken from another Hughes piece, "A
Dream Deferred." Set in a modest apartment in south Chicago after World War II, the play focuses on the Younger family: Lena, the matriarch; her son Walter Lee, a chauffeur; her daughter Beneatha, a college student; Walter Lee's wife, Ruth; and their son, Travis. In the opening scene, Ruth arouses her family on an early Friday morning. Ruth is described by Hansberry as "a settled woman" whose disappointment in life clearly shows in her demeanor. Walter, conversely, is a lean, intense man whose voice always contains "a quality of indictment." His second question of the morning--"Check come today?"--immediately reveals the central conflict of the play. Walter's father has died, leaving a ten-thousand-dollar insurance policy to Lena. Walter refuses to give him the money so that he, along with two other men, can invest it in a liquor store. Lena, however, uses part of the money as a down payment on a house in another neighborhood. Yet when a white representative from the neighborhood family plans to move to offer to buy back their home, Walter refuses. He submerges his materialistic aspirations--for a time, at least--and rallies to support the family's dream. The play ends as the Youngers close the door to their apartment and head for their new home. For Walter, whose desires are frustrated, this ending leaves unsettled the question posed by Hughes in "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?"

Because the play explores a universal theme--the search for freedom and a better life--the majority of its first-run audience loved the work. According to Gerald Weales, A Raisin in the Sun reflects neither the traditional Negro show--folksy and exotic--nor the reactionary protest play, with black characters railing against the injustices of white oppression. Rather, A Raisin in the Sun is a play about a family that just happens to be black. New York Times critic Brooks Atkinson admired A Raisin in the Sun because it explores serious problems without becoming academic or ponderous. "[Hansberry] has told the inner as well as outer truth about a Negro family in Chicago," the critic observed. "The play has vigor as well as veracity and is likely to destroy the complacency of anyone who sees it." Weales labeled Raisin "a good play" whose "basic strength lies in the character and the problem of Walter Lee, which transcends his being a Negro. If the play were only the Negro-white conflict that crops up when the family's proposed move is about to take place, it would be editorial, momentarily effective, and nothing more. Walter Lee's difficulty, however, is that he has accepted the American myth of success at its face value, that he is trapped, as Willy Loman was trapped, by a false dream. In planting so indigenous an American image at the center of her play, Miss Hansberry has come as close as possible to what she intended--a play about Negroes which is not simply a Negro play."

A Raisin in the Sun ran for 530 performances. Shortly thereafter, in 1961, a film version of the drama was released, starring Sidney Poitier and Claudia McNeil. Hansberry won a special award at the Cannes Film Festival and was nominated for a Screen Writers Guild award for her screenplay. She then began work on a second play about a Jewish intellectual who vacillates between social commitment and paralyzing disillusionment. Entitled The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window (1964), the play ran on Broadway for 101 performances despite mixed reviews and poor sales. "Its tenure on Broadway parallels the playwright's own failing health," Kirkwood noted. The play closed on January 12, 1965, the day Hansberry died of cancer at the age of thirty-four.

Although Hansberry and her husband divorced in 1964, Nemiroff remained dedicated to the playwright and her work. Appointed her literary executor, he collected her ex-wife's writings after her death in the autobiographical To Be Young, Gifted and Black: Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words (1969). He also edited and published her last three plays, which were produced after 1970: Les Blancs, a psychological and social drama about a European-educated African who returns home to protest colonialism; The Drinking Gourd, a black woman's story of slavery and emancipation; and What Use Are Flowers?, a fable about an aging hermit who, in a ravaged world, tries to impart to children his remembrances of a past civilization. "It's true that there's a great deal of pain for me in this," Nemiroff told Arlynn Nellhaus about his custodianship, "but there's also a great deal of satisfaction. There is first-class writing, and the joy of seeing [Lorraine's] ideas become a contemporary force again ... [is] rewarding.... She was proud of black culture, the black experience and struggle.... But she was also in love with all cultures, and she related to the struggles of other people.... She was tremendously affected
by the struggle of ordinary people--the heroism of ordinary people and the ability of people to laugh and
transcend."

Critical Reception

*A Raisin in the Sun* is ranked with *Arthur Miller* 's *Death of a Salesman*, *Tennessee Williams* 's *Glass
Menagerie*, and Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* as a classic in American theater. Recently the
play has attracted a new generation of admirers. In 1984 Nemiroff published an expanded, twenty-fifth
anniversary edition of the play. With the restoration of scenes and text originally removed from the first
production, *A Raisin in the Sun* was also adapted for television in 1989, starring Danny Glover, Esther Rolle,
and Kim Yancey. Critic Ed Siegel called the expanded version "a major American work of art, as gritty as it is
poetic, as specific as it is universal, and as contemporary as it is ... visionary. [It] is a bristling, unqualified
triumph." Although Hansberry wrote other plays, they pale in comparison to *A Raisin in the Sun*. Full of
power, compassion, and emotional appeal, *Raisin* is, without question, Hansberry's best work. As Siegel
concluded: "[Hansberry] may, in the end, have been just a one-play playwright. But what a ... play."

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *A Raisin in the Sun: A Drama in Three Acts* (play) 1959
- *A Raisin in the Sun* (screenplay) 1960
- *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window: A Drama in Three Acts* (play) 1964
- *To Be Young, Gifted and Black: A Portrait of Lorraine Hansberry in Her Own Words* (play) 1969
- *Les Blancs* (play) 1970

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Criticism


  Detailed explication of *A Raisin in the Sun.*


  Provides a brief assessment of Hansberry's career as well as an overview of *A Raisin in the Sun.*


  Special issue devoted to Hansberry, including essays by *James Baldwin*, *Nikki Giovanni*, and *Alex Haley*. 
An overview of A Raisin in the Sun

Play, 1959

L. M. Domina

American Playwright (1930 - 1965)

Other Names Used: Hansberry, Lorraine Vivian;

Drama for Students. Detroit: Gale. From Literature Resource Center.

Full Text:

In many ways, A Raisin in the Sun seems to forecast events that would transpire during the decade following its initial production and beyond. The play raises issues of racial interaction and justice, as well as gender roles, class, and the nature of the American dream. It situates these questions, however, within the context of individual choice and individual heroism. Each of the characters in this play attempts to achieve a meaningful life within a struggle against cultural impediments, and an analysis of the characters' responses to racism will reveal the nature of their heroic qualities.

When the play opens, the Younger family has no clear leader. Its power structure is complicated, especially in terms of American norms. Because the American nuclear family was unabashedly patriarchal in the 1950's, Walter would seem to be the head of the household. Yet although he might (or might not) make the most money, he is not the family's breadwinner in the traditional sense, since Ruth and occasionally Mama also work. At this point in history, most married women—especially most white married women—did not work outside the home. Although these norms varied by race, white norms were so culturally dominant that they were aspired to even by members of other races. Despite his positions as husband and father, Walter continues to live because of economic necessity in his mother's house. And even Travis knows that he can make extra money by delivering groceries, an activity his mother forbids because of his age. Regardless of the details, though, Walter obviously cannot support this family alone.

It is Mama who has the money, though only because of an imminent insurance payment due her because of her husband's death. Although the other characters agree that this check is rightfully Mama's, they also each speculate about how it should be used. They also, though, claim an implicit right to it, since as Walter says, “He was my father, too.” Yet this check will ironically be the catalyst for a shift in the family's leadership responsibilities, from Mama to Walter. As Mama says, Walter will “come into his manhood” when he begins to make decisions for the family at the end of the play. This phrase is telling, however; Walter cannot achieve adulthood without achieving “manhood” with its gendered implications. Walter cannot be a man, in other
words, unless he is making decisions for women. His success at the end of the play, therefore, depends on a sexism that is simply more explicit when it is presented by Joseph Asagai.

Asagai is a Nigerian man studying in the United States. Although he discusses ideas with Beneatha, whom he begins to date, he also argues that “between a man and a woman there need be only one kind of feeling.... For a woman that should be enough.” Implicitly, for a man that feeling exists but need not be enough. Even if Beneatha can escape the subjugation of American racism through a return to Africa, in other words, that return itself implies a subjugation to male authority.

Yet Beneatha is herself ambivalent regarding her own dreams. Speaking with Asagai, she describes a childhood incident in which a friend, Rufus, was seriously hurt: “I remember standing there looking at his bloody open face thinking that was the end of Rufus. But the ambulance came and they took him to the hospital and they fixed the broken bones and they sewed it all up.” Beneatha is so amazed at this ability—and at the hope it offers—that she aspires to perform medical wonders herself. “I always thought it was the one concrete thing in the world that a human being could do,” she says. “Fix up the sick, you know—and make them whole again. That was truly being God.” Asagai critiques this last statement: “You wanted to be God?” But Beneatha clarifies her point: “No—I wanted to cure.” Asagai on the other hand claims to live the dreams of the future. Relying on the most romantic of cliches, Asagai urges Beneatha to return to Africa with him: “three hundred years later the African Prince rose up out of the seas and swept the maiden back across the middle passage over which her ancestors had come.” Beneatha's last lines in the play occur when she is telling Mama of this proposal, though she seems to misunderstand Asagai's implications. “To go to Africa, Mama—be a doctor in Africa,” she says. She apparently doesn't realize that Asagai's understanding of her as an African princess is inconsistent with her vision of herself as an African doctor; he wishes her to be a subservient wife to him according to male-dominated social mores.

A major distinction, however, between Asagai's interpretation of gender roles and Mama's turning the leadership of the family over to Walter is the place of dignity in each decision. Asagai's statement that “for a woman it should be enough” to have a husband will have the effect of limiting Beneatha's dignity, of precluding her from completely realizing her dreams. Mama's manipulation of circumstances so that Walter can “come into his manhood” has the effect of increasing his dignity and providing a venue for him to realize his dreams.

For to the extent that the play reveals the effects of racism, it considers racism specifically within the context of a particular family's dreams. Mama makes her decisions, in other words, based on her love for her family rather than primarily on an ideological opposition to segregation. “I just tried to find the nicest place for the least amount of money for my family,” she says to Walter when he objects to her choice. “Them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out all seem to cost twice as much as other houses.” And it is eventually the family members' ability to live by their own decisions rather than to simply react to the decisions of others which affords them their greatest dignity. When Walter appears entirely to give up, Beneatha says of him, “That is not a man. That is nothing but a toothless rat,” recalling the rat Travis had chased in the alley with his friends. “There is nothing left to love” in him, she tells her mother. But Mama disagrees: “There is always something left to love.”

The audience will recall that Mama cares for all living things, even those that do not seem to thrive. Characters in 20th-Century Literature described Mama as a “commanding presence who seems to radiate moral strength and dignity.” According to Hugh Short in an article published in the Critical Survey of Drama, “the theme of heroism found in an unlikely place is perhaps best conveyed through the symbol of Lena's plant. Throughout the play, Lena has tended a small, sickly plant that clings tenaciously to life despite the lack of sunlight in the apartment. Its environment is harsh, unfavorable, yet it clings to life anyway—somewhat like Walter, whose life should long ago have extinguished any trace of heroism in him.”

Walter finally realizes that “There is always something left to love,” even in himself, when he remembers his own father's pride. He declines Lindner's offer because “my father—my father—he earned it for us brick by
brick.... We don't want to make no trouble for nobody or fight no causes, and we will try to be good neighbors.” Walter realizes that just as his dreams cannot be realized for him by others, neither can they be destroyed for him by others. He rises into renewed dignity not simply because he has access to some money but because he has a renewed sense of himself. According to Qun Wang in Works, “even though Lena represents the family's link to the past and tradition, she is very supportive of her children's choices for the future.” Throughout the play, Mama has been trying to lead Walter into the realization of his own dignity, and it is finally through her forgiveness and trust that he achieves it.

Earlier, Mama had assumed certain things about her children's pride because of the example she and her husband had set. Although she had recognized that “Something eating you [Walter] up like a crazy man,” it is only when Walter passively agrees with Ruth's decision regarding the abortion, however, that Mama, in her shock, begins to realize how desperate he feels. He is not like his father after all: “I'm waiting to hear how you be your father's son. Be the man he was ... I'm waiting to hear you talk like him and say we a people who give children life, not who destroys them.” When Walter fails to respond, Mama is indignant: “you are a disgrace to your father's memory.” She considers him a disgrace not only because he won't argue against Ruth's proposed abortion, but because his motive seems to be financial; he has become obsessed with money rather than remembering the values she and his father sought to teach him. Here, Mama begins to realize that she must actively intervene if Walter is to find the inner resources to honor his father's memory. In relinquishing her role as matriarch, she therefore actively participates in the renewal of Walter's hope.

It is in this sense that the characters are heroic. In choosing life, they defy their struggle. In defying their struggle, they refuse the possibility of defeat.

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"White fear" and the studio system: a re-evaluation of Hansberry's original screenplay of A Raisin in the Sun

Zachary Ingle

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Full Text:

Since the "unfilmed original screenplay" of A Raisin in the Sun was first published in 1992, a storm of controversy has arisen over the changes between Lorraine Hansberry's original screenplay and the final, filmed screenplay. That Hansberry's screenplay was bowdlerized out of racist concerns is now left unquestioned, and no one has yet scrutinized these assumptions in order to test their validity. Even as recently as 2004, Lisbeth
Lipari's article, "'Fearful of the Written Word': White Fear, Black Writing, and Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun Screenplay," appeared in Quarterly Journal of Speech. Lipari's work is only the most recent, scholarly judgment that maintains the status quo consensus on this issue. Her goal was to "trace the metamorphosis of whiteness through its journey from Hansberry's original 1959 screenplay to its transformation into the 1961 film mediated by Columbia Pictures' Hollywood production and marketing machine" (82). Were the modifications to Hansberry's original screenplay of A Raisin in the Sun indeed a product of "white fear," or were the alterations made by the studio the norm for stage-to-screen adaptations of that era?

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

It should be noted that despite any changes, Hansberry received sole screenplay credit; no one has ever claimed status as an uncredited writer or collaborator. I shall first look at the changes Hansberry made when she adapted the screenplay from her play before moving on to the cuts the studio made before the film's release. By the end of this paper, I intend to answer the central question as to whether racist fear indeed victimized the original screenplay of A Raisin in the Sun.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

Enormously successful on Broadway, A Raisin in the Sun ran for nineteen months and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, making Hansberry the youngest American and the first Black to do so (Hill and Hatch 376). The play revolves around the Younger family, including Lena, her daughter Beneatha, and son Walter, along with Walter's wife (Ruth) and son (Travis). The action of the play begins the day before the Youngers will receive a $10,000 check, complements of the deceased elder Younger. Beneatha dreams of attending medical school. Walter, on the other hand, hopes to own a liquor store. Ruth just wants out of their small apartment. Lena surprises everyone by putting a down payment on a house in a white neighborhood, still planning to use the rest of the money for Beneatha's tuition at Walter's discretion. Instead of putting the rest of the money in the bank, Walter unwisely invests it in a business venture. One of Walter's partners takes the money and runs; the family's dejection after this news serves as the play's climax. The play ends on a happy note, however, as Lena decides that the family should still move, despite the many financial and racial obstacles they will confront.
Despite A Raisin in the Sun’s place as the only film script by Hansberry, she wrote much about film and its treatment of African Americans. In an unpublished essay from 1951, Hansberry reiterated her desire for a more realistic depiction from Hollywood of Black America, "our sorrow, songs and laughter, to our blues and our poetry" (Hansberry xliii).

Hansberry sought to enhance the scope of the play "[sending] the formerly housebound characters hither and yon into the city" (Hansberry, A Raisin xxix). Negative criticism from some in the black community, who considered her play too bourgeois (Lipari 86-87), also possibly fueled her decision to enhance her script. Hansberry subsequently added many scenes, some to show what the average day entails for her characters, others in an attempt to give them more depth. The majority of the new scenes were added to the first act, seemingly Hansberry’s method to make viewers even more sympathetic to her characters, before the heightened drama of the next two acts.

As in her stageplay, Hansberry gives particular attention to the set design of the apartment in the screenplay. The set remains roughly the same, but Hansberry adds some comments to explain the situation the Youngers find themselves in:

This is the ghetto of Chicago. [...] Not indolence, not indifference, and certainly not the lack of ambition imprisons them, but various enormous questions of the social organization around them which they understand in part, but only in part. (5)
Lipari considers Hansberry's direction as "posing its critique of whiteness through suggestion and indirection rather than explicit statement and by using the camera rather than dialogue or voiceover to prompt recognition of the imposing presence of whiteness on this family" (87).

New scenes in the original screenplay show the Youngers at their daily jobs. Lena is taking care of Mrs. Holiday's daughter, while informing Mrs. Holiday that it would be her last day. The scene is rather lengthy, with extensive speeches by Lena about her work history and philosophy and her desire for Walter to find something more meaningful in his work. Margaret B. Wilkerson notes the significance of this scene in the introduction to the published screenplay: "When Mrs. Holiday questions by mere tone of voice whether Lena can really say good-bye to the child--suggesting in that moment the historic myth that mammys surely prefer their white charges over their own families--Lena curtly affirms that the good-bye is indeed a final one" (Hansberry, A Raisin xxxvi; emphasis added). Wilkerson may be correct in her assessment, but the scene offers little in terms of character development. Hansberry also includes a brief scene with Walter at the mansion of his boss. Frustrated with his occupation as a chauffeur, Walter is unable to relate to another of his trade. In her screenplay, Hansberry also moves Beneatha's first scene with Asagai to a campus lounge. Of these, only the brief scene with Walter made it into the film, though sans the encounter with the other chauffeur.

[ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

The focus then shifts back to Walter, as he visits a liquor store to speak with Herman, the white owner. He informs Herman of his plans to own a liquor store, but Herman discourages him, expressing envy of Walter's "nice nine-to-five job" (61). Walter however does not heed Herman's concern responding, with possible sarcasm, "How big it is of you to want to keep me out of misery" (63).

Perhaps the most interesting of the early supplementary scenes concerns Lena buying apples in a grocery store in her neighborhood. When the white clerk gives her inferior apples at an exorbitant price, she fumes over the discrepancy between these products and the produce available "over yonder where I work" (53-54). Frustrated, Lena takes a streetcar to the famous "open markets" in the far South-side, a Chicago landmark (56).
After Walter's dejection over his mother's decision to buy the home in Clybourne Park, Hansberry includes a montage scene of Walter driving around Chicago. As time passes, Walter stumbles upon a sidewalk speaker delivering a stirring, racially charged address. Coincidentally, Asagai is also there, although he and Walter still do not know each other. Walter walks around some more and comes across Beneatha's other boyfriend, George, who offers Walter a lift home. Although the speaker on the street makes some valid points, he says nothing new (as Hansberry admits herself in her description of the sequence), and the new scene retards the screenplay's pacing. The montage of Walter driving, however, was filmed.

Hansberry places the scene when Lena receives her gifts (garden tools and ostentatious hat) in the backyard of their future house. This scene offers perhaps Hansberry's strongest social commentary, as she depicts their novel, yet still uncomfortable, surroundings in the stage directions:

> It is to them a lovely house: rather more handsome than they had permitted themselves to dream. [...] Each face regards it with its own reaction of disbelief. These are people who are primarily accustomed to disappointment. (150)

The film retained this scene. The Youngers arrive by taxi (noticeably driven by a white taxi driver who refers to Walter as "Sir") to their new home and the audience marvels with the family as they tour their future abode.

Hansberry offers a chilly description of the reaction of the Youngers' future neighbors:

> The camera roams at medium close over the surrounding houses [...] where rather ordinary types and varieties of Americans live; but at the moment something sinister clings to them. At some windows curtains drop back quickly into place. [...] The faces--the eyes of women and children, in the main--look hard with a curiosity that, for the most part, is clearly hostile. (155)

With such writing, Hansberry captures the essence of what it means to have a "dream deferred," as Langston Hughes eloquently phrased it in the poem from which the play acquired its title.

One should also note themes, characters, and scenes that Hansberry did not expand upon or include in her screenplay. Despite her Pan-Africanism and belief that changes for Blacks in Africa could also lead to changes for Blacks in America (Carter 47), she developed Asagai's character no further. She also omits the scenes included in the expanded text of the play, scenes written before the play was on Broadway but deleted for the sake of playing time (see Wilkerson). (Some of Asagai and Beneatha's expanded conversation in Act III did make the film.) Although these scenes were utilized in the play's twenty-fifth-anniversary revival and now serve as a curious novelty for fans and scholars of A Raisin in the Sun, they pale in comparison to what did make it into the play, and have subsequently fallen out of favor with audiences and critics.

Overall a marvel, Hansberry's screenplay ably bears comparison with the best screenplays adapted from previous material. Spike Lee was so impressed after reading the original screenplay that he now considers Hansberry an icon in African-American cinema as well, her name worthy of consideration along with Oscar Micheaux, Ossie Davis, Gordon Parks, and Melvin Van Peebles (Hansberry, A Raisin xlvii). However, the strength of her screenplay lies not in the new scenes (which offer little in the way of a "more radical critique of whiteness," contra Lipari), but rather in her direction. Hansberry's screenplay delights in its readability and flow; one can envision the film in the mind while reading it. I do not argue that Hansberry was an "establishment artist"; her other writings, not to mention the surveillance conducted by the FBI for her promotion of socialism, prove that she was anything but (Carter 39). Still, little evidence supports the notion that Hansberry's screenplay is any more sweeping in its condemnation of entrenched racism and capitalism than the play that first gave voice to these dissents. As Lipari herself admits, new dialogue about race is kept to a minimum, but the mise-en-scene and cinematography suggested in the script reflects Hansberry's scathing
critique of racism and capitalism. Lipari forgets, however, that this is Hollywood--rarely will writers see their screenplays, as envisioned, on the screen. Rather than blame the studio executives, perhaps more criticism should be aimed at director Daniel Petrie.

With the screenplay complete, production for the film began 6 July 1960 and ended September 7. Most of the cast from the original stage production reprised their roles in the film, including Sidney Poitier as Walter, Claudia McNeil as Lena, Ruby Dee playing Ruth, Diana Sands as Beneatha, Ivan Dixon as Asagai, John Fiedler in the role of Linder, and Louis Gossett, Jr., as George Murchison. Stage producer Phillip Rose served in the same capacity for the film, along with David Susskind. As mentioned above, Petrie was chosen as director. At that time, he had only done television work and one feature, The Bramble Bush, released in 1960.

Cuts to Hansberry's screenplay occurred in both pre-production (cut from the screenplay before filming) and post-production (filmed, but cut while editing). Regrettably, we do not know which category all the expunged scenes fall under, but the memoranda reveal a few answers. For example, the scene involving Lena at her employer's was cut in its entirety with suitable rationale from Sam Briskin, Columbia Pictures Vice President of Production: "It was agreed that [these pages] stopped the flow of the story, introduce a character--Mrs. Holiday-whom we never see again, and in general contain unnecessary exposition" (Lipari 92). Lena's shopping experience was also cut, but the film retained Hansberry's new lines for Lena pertaining to her distaste for supermarkets. Perhaps the filmmakers operated under this mindset: given the wealth of wonderful characters in Hansberry's play, if certain new scenes did not develop the characters further, or even amplify the tension, why include them?

Unfortunately, little is known about Hansberry's opinion about the cuts made. Even in her "informal autobiography," To Be Young, Gifted and Black, adapted by her husband and notable producer in African-American theatre, Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry fails to mention the film, favorably or otherwise. Nemiroff worked hard to also get Hansberry's original screenplay published. He died, however, months before its release. Needless to say, Nemiroff had unique insight into Hansberry's work:

The Hansberry screenplay is [...] vastly different from the 1961 movie, which was essentially the stageplay with minor "openings out." At least forty percent of the text (not counting smaller variations within speeches--there are hundreds of these) is brand new, containing what all who've read it recently recognize as some of her finest [...] writing [...] While retaining the primary scenes, themes, and dialogue of the play, therefore, she sought to capture through the camera what the stageplay could only talk about: the full reality of the ghetto experience. (Hansberry, A Raisin xvii; emphasis added)

So why were the cuts made? First of all, Nemiroff's estimate that forty percent of the text is new seems rather high; a close reading of both the screenplay and stageplay reveals that an estimate of twenty to thirty percent would be more accurate. Lipari places the blame on the Columbia studio executives who had most of the
control over the film (90). Wilkerson maintains that Vice President Briskin's editorial notes, speaking on behalf of "the movie studios who were incredibly cautious about offending the American (i.e., white) public" catalyzed the cuts (Hansberry, A Raisin xxxvi–xxxvii). Lipari makes much of the memoranda over A Raisin in the Sun that passed between studio executives. She particularly criticizes Columbia Pictures Corporation executive Arthur Kramer's memo to Susskind:

In general, David, I am fearful of the written word, as opposed to a vis-a-vis conversation. I am fearful because notes expressed on paper seem so much colder and more remote than those expressed verbally. I should like you to remember while reading these notes the strong affirmative reaction we all had after reading the first draft screenplay. That reaction, as you recall, was that the author did a remarkable job of transferring a wonderful play to the screenplay medium. [...] this is particularly impressive when one considers the author has never before written a screenplay. (Lipari 90)

It is the phrase "fearful of the written word" that Lipari takes to task, finding that it "unintentionally evokes a long tradition of white fear of black writing" (82). Lipari argues that the studio missed an "opportunity to contest the Hollywood images of whiteness associated with goodness, universality, and innocence" (83) with the changes to the original screenplay.

The changes to Hansberry's screenplay resulted in a film closer to her original play. The film was received with somewhat mixed reviews, often divided over its "staginess." Arthur Knight of the Saturday Review said that the film transcends the "limitations of its single set and three-act construction" through the direction. Notable New York Times critic Bosley Crowther admitted that the film was "stagelike," but admired how Hansberry's play had been "turned into an equally fine screen drama." Phillip T. Hartung (Commonweal) declared the film "rather static [...] relying greatly on close-ups and dialogue." Anonymous reviewers in Newsweek and Life were much harsher, as they argued that the action is too confined to call it a "real movie" and is "too tightly limited to theater dimensions." (1) In the end, however, A Raisin in the Sun was a success, garnering BAFTA Award and Golden Globe nominations for Poitier and McNeil, while Petrie acquired a Directors Guild of America nomination, and Dee won "Best Supporting Actress" by the National Board of Review Hansberry also did not go overlooked, her screenplay nominated by the Writers Guild of America for "Best Written American Drama." The film was also honored at Cannes, where it won the Gary Cooper Award for "human values" and Petrie was nominated for the coveted Palm d'Or.

A Raisin in the Sun was released when stage-to-screen adaptations may have been at their height, and a comparison to these other films should be made. Both Inherit the Wind (1960, based on a play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, film directed by Stanley Kramer) and Long Day's Journey Into Night (1962, a Eugene O'Neill play, directed by Sidney Lumet) pleased audiences and critics, as did 12 Angry Men (1957, adapted from a teleplay, again by Sidney Lumet). Nor was A Raisin in the Sun the first major film based on a black play; United Artists released Take a Giant Step (Leacock, 1959) two years previous, and the film received two Golden Globe nominations, despite its failure at the box office.

Although Inherit the Wind contains some exterior scenes, Long Day's Journey Into Night is distinctively stage-bound. 12 Angry Men, released four years prior, was a hit despite all of the film's action in the small jury room, save for a scant three minutes. One might reasonably conclude that the producers of A Raisin in the Sun saw little need to retain all of Hansberry's new exterior shots. A precedent had already been set for feature films that remained close to the plays from which they originated and were perhaps a bit stagy in the way they were filmed. Likewise, studio executives saw little need in tampering with Hansberry's play, a conventional, but unsurprising choice, given the notoriously conservative nature of studios of the era, who often operated with the principle "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." In remaining close to the play, they went so far as to keep the entire principal Broadway cast (save the role of Travis, whose age necessitated a new young actor).
Spike Lee, who contributed a commentary to the published screenplay, also believes that Hansberry's original screenplay was censored: "It seems to me all the cuts had to deal with softening a too defiant black voice" (Hansberry, A Raisin xlvi). Lee points out, "Of course, Columbia probably cited length as the reason for the deletions. But I feel Lorraine was right in her vision to 'open up' the play [...] She wanted to make it cinematic, to make it a film. In the final result, the film is very stagey" (Hansberry, A Raisin xlvi; emphasis in original). Despite Lee's opinion, A Raisin in the Sun's length should be considered. The film runs 128 minutes, over thirty minutes longer than the average feature of that era. Indeed, Hansberry herself gave length as the reason for the cuts (Lipari 96). Hansberry's envisioned film may have been more potent and emotive in its depiction of racism in Chicago, but shorter films make safer investments: the shorter the film, the more showings in a day. It would not have been the first time that Hollywood favored profits over art; one recalls the decision to release a truncated (and disastrous) Cleopatra (Mankiewicz, 1963) rather than in two three-hour parts.

Lipari, Lee, and others criticize the film as if it were completely emasculated; a close viewing of the film reveals quite the opposite. Much race language from the play/screenplay made the transition to the film: Walter's statement about how "rich white people live"; Lena advising Ruth to call in sick with the flu, since it "sounds so respectable" to white people; Lena's statement about knowing she never was a "rich white woman"; all of Walter's talk about how black men and women are; both Linder scenes preserved en toto; and Walter's plea to the "Great White Father [...] we's ain't gwine cum out deh and dirty up yo's white folks' neighborhood." In addition, the words "faggoty" and "crackers" are each used twice, fairly offensive vocabulary at that time. Although Lipari refers to the "studio's erasures of so-called 'race issues,'" (91) the film obviously preserves a significant black voice.

The notion of "white fear" (at least in this instance) is further invalidated when considering the abortion issue, a topic far more controversial at that time than any racial issues Hansberry brings up in her original screenplay. Columbia chose not to censor the scenes dealing with abortion, something they could have done easily. Why then would they consider a realistic portrayal of Chicago's black neighborhoods more controversial than abortion? This makes little sense, and those who have raised their ire over the changes to Hansberry's screenplay fail to notice this.

The Columbia executives receive little credit from those critical of their editing decisions. What about their decision to finance the picture? In a New York Times interview (17 July 1960) a Columbia spokesman stated, "Frankly, [A Raisin in the Sun] is a risky project for the studio. Columbia decided to gamble on it because they felt it had a chance to be a great picture" (Raisin DVD). Thankfully, Columbia did finance A Raisin in the Sun, the first great black film of the 1960s and proof that black films could reach large audiences.

Unfortunately, we will never know what motivated Columbia's decision to edit A Raisin in the Sun to its final form, barely different from its stage form. Racism has become a simple scapegoat for the action the studio took. This author realizes the dangers in questioning the established opinion on the subject, but various factors must also be considered. To take the effortless course and assume "white fear" was the determining factor appears simplistic given the milieu in which the film A Raisin in the Sun was created. Critics of the film, ignoring 1961 post-McCarthyism Hollywood, impose the Hollywood of Stepin Fetchit, Mammy, and Prissy on this era.

Screenplays were often added or deleted to while filming, and Hansberry's screenplay (though brilliant) was no exception. No doubt length was a concern as it has always been, and scenes deemed unnecessary were deleted. Perhaps audiences would have responded favorably to a longer film; if so, this makes studio executives guilty of nothing more than ignorance. Although "white fear" (as articulated by Lipari) has existed in Hollywood, little suggests its involvement in the making of A Raisin in the Sun. Columbia executives admired Hansberry's play and attempted to remain true to her vision as much as possible. Also, critics who think Petrie and others dismissed Hansberry's screenplay entirely should watch the film again and take note of the new scenes and lines that were included (three scenes in the Kitty Kat Klub, including a new conversation among Walter, Willie, and
Bobo, in addition to the aforementioned scenes). Lipari's view of A Raisin in the Sun as a production that "paradoxically contests, succumbs to, and perpetuates the demands of structural racism," (90-91) has here been refuted.

Finally then, A Raisin in the Sun stands as the greatest African-American play of the twentieth century, as well as one of the greatest American dramas, period. Black theatre historian James V. Hatch says, "A Raisin in the Sun confronted Whites for an acknowledgement that a black family could be fully human, 'just like us'" (Hill and Hatch 370). The universal themes in A Raisin in the Sun helped it cross all racial, class, age, and ethnic boundaries, while still fitting W. E. B. DuBois's criteria for Negro theatre as being "by, for, about, and near [Negroes]." Furthermore, the film paved the way for future films, such as the films of 1963-1964 (Nothing But a Man [Roemer, 1964], One Potato Two Potato [Peerce, 1964], The Cool World [Clarke, 1964]) that took Blacks seriously (see Johnson). In A Raisin in the Sun, Blacks had a film truly their own, a film of which to be proud and that still holds up well 45 years later (quite unlike the black-cast musicals The Green Pastures [Connelly and Keighley, 1936], Cabin in the Sky [Minnelli, 1943], and Carmen Jones [Preminger, 1954] that perpetuated long-held African-American stereotypes). Those that have examined the controversy over Hansberry's original screenplay of A Raisin in the Sun have done us a great service; still, we must always separate the rational arguments from those influenced by imprudent blameworthiness on white racism and fear.

Author's Note

After its Sundance premiere, a new version of A Raisin in the Sun was broadcast 25 Feb. 2008 on ABC. Similar to the original version, most of the cast from the recent Broadway revival starred, including Phylicia Rashad as Lena, Sean Combs as Walter, Audra McDonald as Ruth, and Sanaa Lathan as Beneatha. Director Kenny Leon also brought his own new vision of the play to the small screen. Screenwriter Paris Qualles's new version is a freer interpretation, even adding numerous scenes to Hansberry's play (and original screenplay), most notably two visits to the abortionist. (Ruth's decision not to go with the abortion is made more explicit, perhaps to pacify a more conservative audience.) This lengthier version (131 minutes) may be the result of two phenomena: continued longer running times for the average film, and most likely, the three-hour slot allotted for movies shown in prime time today. Though the 2008 version is subsequently less stagy than the 1961 film version, some of the performances are not as strong, leaving some critics to compare the new version unfavorably. Still, the film earned three Emmy nominations, including Outstanding Made for Television Movie, as well as a similar Golden Globe nomination, despite its artistic paucity in comparison to the original film version. This newer version seems only to justify my thesis that the studio made the right decision to go with a shorter and more faithful adaptation.

Note

(1.) All reviews mentioned in this paragraph are from Richard M. Leeson's Lorraine Hansberry: A Research and Production Sourcebook, 105-07.
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* I am also indebted to the "source of all sources," the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).

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"Never in the history of the American theatre had so much of the truth of black people's lives been seen on the stage," James Baldwin wrote in "Sweet Lorraine," an essay about the 1959 debut of "A Raisin in the Sun" and the play's twenty-nine-year-old first-time author, Lorraine Hansberry, a pioneer for Amiri Baraka, Ed Bullins, and August Wilson, the subsequent high-water marks of African-American drama. Although Broadway musicals had been borrowing and banking on African-American syncopations, choreography, and stars since the early twenties, before Hansberry black people, as Baldwin wrote, had "ignored the theatre because the theatre had always ignored them." "A Raisin in the Sun," which Baraka called "the quintessential civil-rights drama," integrated New York theatre with cunning humor instead of ham-fisted hectoring. Through the astutely observed dynamics of the Youngers, a working-class Chicago family, Hansberry parsed African-Americans' complex attitudes about race and class; she also captured the humiliation and dignity of their struggle to survive. The play was, in many ways, a first: Hansberry was the first female African-American to have a play produced on Broadway; the director, Lloyd Richards, was the first African-American to direct a Broadway play. In the poem from which Hansberry took her title, Langston Hughes asks, "What happens to a dream deferred?" For America, as the sixties loomed, Hansberry's play became not so much an answer as a poetic augury of the uproar to come.

Hansberry, the youngest of four children who grew up in the upper-middle-class household of a black Chicago real-estate agent, set "A Raisin in the Sun" (in revival at the Royale) in a dark, cramped, cockroach-ridden house on the city's South Side, a "beat-up hole" that seems to bear out the late Mr. Younger's adage of disappointment: "Seems like God didn't see fit to give the black man nothing but dreams." As Baldwin wrote, "Black people recognized that house and all the people in it . . . and supplied the play with an interpretative element which could not be present in the minds of white people: a kind of claustrophobic terror, created not only by their knowledge of the house but by their knowledge of the streets."

As the play opens, a ten-thousand-dollar life-insurance check--Mr. Younger's death benefit--is owed to his widow, the family matriarch, Lena (Phylicia Rashad). The promise of this windfall sets in motion a drama of conflicting needs and flushes out into the open the old that special abrading American sense of expectation. Lena's frustrated, callow thirty-five-year-old son, Walter Lee (Sean Combs), is a chauffeur; his wife, Ruth (Audra McDonald), works, like Lena, as a domestic. The uneducated Walter, who wants to buy a liquor store, sees the money as his ticket from stagnation to actualization. Lena's outspoken, idealistic twenty-year-old daughter, Beneatha (Sanaa Lathan), who aspires to be a doctor, wants the money for her education. Lena, who desires only the well-being of her family, has a hankering for "a little old two-story somewhere, with a yard where Travis"--Walter Lee and Ruth's ten-year-old son (Alexander Mitchell)--"could play in the summertime." When she finally makes a down payment on a piece of property in a lower-middle-class white part of town, her decision is based on pragmatism, not principle. "I just tried to find the nicest place for the least amount of money," she says.

As Walter Lee, Combs (a.k.a. P. Diddy) is making his stage debut. Other than a couple of film cameos, his performing has been limited to the concert stage and the boardroom of the Bad Boy Worldwide Entertainment Group, of which he is the founder and C.E.O. Handsome, muscular, full of attitude (he didn't get the nickname Puffy for nothing), he is a brave man; in time, he may even be a good actor. Here, he is just adequate. Combs connects well enough to the sulky restlessness of Walter Lee's desire, but he has a tyro's tendency to indicate rather than embody feelings. Walter Lee is a man tormented by the dream of abundance: he's at odds with his wife and his life. A seasoned actor like Sidney Poitier, who originated the role, could convey the roiling
tragicomic contradictions of the character. But this nuance is unavailable to Combs, who can play only one idea at a time. In order to keep him from lowering the amperage of the crucial scenes, the director, Kenny Leon, cleverly contrives to mask him: when Lena announces her purchase of the house, Walter sulks at the window with his back to the audience; for most of the scene in which the family learns that Walter has betrayed his mother's trust and wasted the remainder of the family money on a dopey business venture, Combs's head remains firmly between his knees. We want to see what he's feeling, but Combs just doesn't have the resources to show us. This absence of texture mutes the resonance of Walter Lee's character, but not, luckily, of the play itself, whose well-crafted structure generates its own thrilling momentum.

The purest music of "Raisin" sounds through the female characters. Rashad, in a breakthrough performance, quite unlike anything she has done before, abandons the detachment that, for me, has often inhibited her acting. A veteran of "The Cosby Show," she knows how to make the smallest glance pay off; here, she finds every note of Lena's humor and pathos. With her stolid bearing and her Southern drawl, Rashad seems to channel Lena's fervent heart. As Beneatha, Lathan is Rashad's equal in panache. Her witty portrayal is a whirlwind of flighty intellectual pronouncement. "Enough of this assimilationist junk!" she says, turning off a radio that is playing blues. Hansberry uses Beneatha as a vehicle to satirize African-American culture, including Pan-African nostalgia. At one point, she dons a gaudy tribal outfit—given to her by her Nigerian gentleman caller, Asagai (the excellent Teagle F. Bougere)—for a date with her rich but philistine American boyfriend. Before he arrives, Lathan cavorts hilariously around the stage in a well-observed sendup of African dance.

Lathan's scintillating fizz is fitting for Beneatha, who is all future; Ruth, by contrast, is stalled by circumstance. The expert Audra McDonald shades her depressed character in distinctive blue notes. After sending Travis off to await a beating for coming home late, Ruth learns about the family's new house. At first, the news poleaxes her. Then, in a splendid moment, she explodes with roaring, pounding glee. "Is there--is there a whole lot of sunlight?" she asks Lena. Collecting herself, Ruth heads for the door. "Well--I guess I better see 'bout Travis," she says. "Lord, I sure don't feel like whipping nobody today!"

At the finale, Hansberry packs her characters off to the white neighborhood, which has already sent an emissary, Mr. Lindner (David Aaron Baker)—a totem of the white American ignorance that Baldwin called "not only colossal, but sacred"—who has tried in vain to buy them out. What plays to white audiences as a happy ending plays to black spectators as something wholly different. "A Raisin in the Sun" endorses cultural difference but not cultural separation. Its sly civility bears witness to one of Ralph Ellison's observations: "Without the black American something irrepressibly hopeful and creative would go out of the American spirit," Ellison wrote. "And the nation might well succumb to the moral slobbism that has always threatened its existence from within."

Sometimes, however, moral slobbism can be foisted on Americans from without. Take, for instance, Andrew Lloyd Webber's "Bombay Dreams" (at the Broadway, under the direction of Stephen Pimlott), one of the silliest musicals in recent memory. In this British import, the "scum from the slum" Akaash (the hardworking Manu Narayan) gets discovered by a zaftig Bollywood diva, Rani (the hard-shaking Ayesha Dharker), and becomes a star. Over the course of nine production numbers, Akaash briefly forgets his roots, but not, unfortunately, the lyrics, by Don Black, including those of the show's hit song, "Shakalaka Baby," whose most eloquent passage goes, "Shakalaka baby shakalaka baby / Come and shakalaka with me." Deep Singh's and David Sharma's percussion is excellent, but when you find yourself watching the drummers at the side of the stage instead of the exotic nubile hordes giving good cleavage in front of you, there's a problem. The actress and masterly cookbook writer Madhur Jaffrey plays Shanti, Akaash's grandmother, who lives to see Akaash save both her shantytown and his soul. Jaffrey's book "From Curries to Kebabs" is on sale in the theatre lobby. I recommend her recipes; it's the show I can't swallow.

JOHN LAHR

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