

## Theater Review: VSC's *A Raisin in the Sun*

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**Virginia Stage Company's production of Lorraine Hansberry's classic *A Raisin in the Sun* is one of the finest theatrical offerings of this season.**



Elain Graham and Lisa Renee Pitts

Chronicling the experiences of an African American family living in poverty in the South Side of Chicago in the early 1950s, Hansberry's incisive play was the first by a black woman to be produced on Broadway. It was a huge hit, and has become a staple of high school literature courses.

Hansberry was a wonderful writer, with a clear understanding of humanity. *A Raisin in*

*the Sun* is a play of rich characters, with clear motivations, and complex emotional subtexts. As the play begins, the members of the Younger family are awaiting the arrival of a life insurance check, following the death of the family patriarch. Lena (Elain Graham), the matriarch, plans to use the money to move the family out of the ghetto. Her son Walter Lee (Wendell B. Franklin) has a plan to use the money to open a liquor store. Her daughter Beneatha (Nicole Gant), already a college student, hopes to attend medical school. When the money arrives it causes great conflict for the family, in particular for Walter Lee, who is tired of working as a chauffeur, and

feels the most dehumanized by the myth of the American Dream.



Lisa Renee Pitts, Wendell B. Franklin, Mark Curtis, and Nicole Gant

Artistic Director Chris Hanna has directed the show with an unflinching humanity. His *Raisin in the Sun* is a beautifully cohesive production brought to vivid life. VSC is the local theater which most consistently offers

beautiful physical productions, and *A Raisin in the Sun* is no exception. Jeni Schaefer has designed appealing costumes, in a vivid and accurate period style. Scenic Designer Terry Flint has created a believable recreation of the Youngers' tiny apartment, complete with running water, which is itself dwarfed by the surrounding buildings. It is a lovely and effective design. Lighting Designer A. Nelson Ruger IV is doing more understated work here, but it is no less stunning than usual.

What really pushes this production over the top, though, is the cast. They are exceptional. Graham's performance of Lena is one of raw power. She commands the stage, and control of her family, all while flying in the face of the stereotype the character could be, and has been, in other productions. Gant and Lisa Renee Pitts, as Walter Lee's wife Ruth, are exceptional actresses, who give focused performances. Axel Avin, Jr., and Matthew Cabbil lend credible support in the



roles of Beneatha's suitors. Local actor Mark Curtis is just terrific as Mr. Linder, the man from the welcoming committee for the new neighborhood where Lena wants to move her family. Of course, this being the 1950s, welcoming is a euphemism for racial intimidation. Curtis plays the role with just the right mix of fear, superiority, and condescension.

Lisa Renee Pitts and Wendell B. Franklin

The real standout, though, is Franklin as Walter Lee. Walter Lee is one of the most challenging characters in American dramatic literature, equal parts sympathetic and despicable. Franklin plays the character without shying from the more unpleasant aspects, and still manages to make him the sympathetic protagonist Hansberry meant for him to be. His is a heroic performance, and he belongs in the pantheon of great actors who have given life to the part, including Sidney Poitier (who created the role on Broadway and on film), Danny Glover, and Sean "P. Diddy" Combs, although I think Mr. Franklin was a far sight better than Mr. Combs (with all due deference to the hip-hop mogul).

The most incredible thing about VSC's production is how new the play *feels*. Hanna and company have managed not only to find great humanity, but also brightness, life, and humor in the play that many familiar with it may not even realize was there. For fans of the play, and especially for those with only a passing familiarity, this new production of *A Raisin in the Sun* is not to be missed. After all, it would be a shame to miss one of the best theatrical events of the season.

*A Raisin in the Sun* is running at the Wells Theatre in Downtown Norfolk through April 18. Tickets range from \$15-\$50, and are available from Ticketmaster, or through the Wells Box Office (757-621-1234). For more information visit VSC's website at [www.vastage.com](http://www.vastage.com).