

VEER Magazine

Raisin Shines

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By Jerome Langston

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

Like a raisin in the sun?

Excerpted from *Harlem* by Langston Hughes

As the final regular season production of Virginia Stage Company's 31st season, *A Raisin in the Sun* provides a dramatic, punctuated end to a successful run full of rather lighthearted theatrical fare, including the Jules Verne's classic *Around the World in 80 Days*.

This is VSC's first production of *A Raisin*, and it marks the 50th anniversary of the play's premiere on Broadway. That premiere was arguably a theatrical milestone, as it became both the first play written by an African-American female playwright to be produced on Broadway as well as the first Broadway work helmed by a black director. In addition to this VSC premiere celebrating the play's half-century anniversary, playwright Lorraine Hansberry is also being honored as part of Virginia's Minds Wide Open program.

"We were looking to do the work of an inspiring woman artist in the theatre and Lorraine Hansberry just stood out for me in so many ways," explained Chris Hanna, VSC's Artistic Director. Hanna is also directing this production of the classic play.

I inquire if Hanna has been a fan of Hansberry's work as a writer in general. "The sad thing about her life is that it ended so early...I really think this play [suggests] that she might have been on her way to being America's greatest and best known playwright," he responded. "She never got there just because of her lifespan...I really do think [Raisin] must be within the Top 2 or 3 best American plays."

When *Raisin* debuted on Broadway in March of 1959, playwright Hansberry and producer Phillip Rose were understandably wary of its chances for success. The previous night's preview audience's reaction was reportedly underwhelming. And of course this play, with its all black major cast and its authorship by a black woman in the 1950s, was a theatrical anomaly to begin with. The fact that the production received the prestigious New York Drama Critics Circle award for best American play of 1959 and ran for nearly two years on Broadway, is remarkable on its own merit.

Yet what makes its success truly groundbreaking is that it essentially opened the doors of the Great White Way to both black patrons and artists to come in. Though it was not the first essentially African-American production to run on Broadway, it was definitely the first to garner universal appeal and related success. In the years that have followed the original

Broadway production, there have been countless regional productions of it throughout the country, as well as successful film and television versions of the play. It even spawned a highly successful, Tony award-winning Broadway musical version of itself called simply *Raisin*, in 1973. Most recently, a 2004 Broadway revival of *A Raisin in the Sun* won a Tony award for actress Phylicia Rashad. It was the first win by a black woman in the category of Best Performance by a Leading Actress in a Play.

Hansberry's autobiographically laced drama concerns itself with the fictional African-American family the Youngers, a poverty-stricken Southside Chicago clan living in the 1950s, who simply desire their own rightful piece of the American "pie." When the matriarch, Lena "Mama" Younger, receives a \$10,000 check from her deceased husband's life insurance policy, it creates unintended conflict within the family...creating schisms between Lena's son, Walter Lee, and his wife, Ruth. Throughout the three act epic, weighty themes of family loyalty, integration, and greed are tackled generously and smartly, and the play eventually ends on a satisfyingly positive, rather than a somber note.

Portraying the male lead character of Walter Lee in VSC's production is Wendell B. Franklin, a newbie to the stage company. He's not, however, new to the role, as he just played the same character in Weston Playhouse's late 2009 production of *Raisin*.

I ask him to describe Walter Lee Younger as a character. "I think Walter Lee is reflective of a lot of African-American men in that time period. Guys who are very smart, who had dreams but just didn't have the opportunities to realize some of those dreams..." he responded.

Culling its title from a famous line in one of Langston Hughes' signature poems, the idea of "a dream deferred" is perhaps even more intriguing considering the current day possibilities of African-American life in this country. Hanna acknowledged this dichotomy, early on in our phone interview. He even refers to this production as "the first post-Obama" play.

"So much of the play has to do with being included in the American story as an African-American. I think to some degree the idea that that can include the presidency gives new resonance to the play."

A Raisin in the Sun

Virginia Stage Company

Wells Theater

March 30-April 18

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