

VSC's 'Raisin in the Sun' explores American dreams

NORFOLK

It's the mid-1950s, and Lena's about to get \$10,000 in insurance money from her dead husband's policy. Her son, Walter Lee, wants a big piece of it to build a business.

Lena doesn't trust his scheme. She has other ideas for that cash. The volatile Walter Lee pushes every button possible to get his mother to change her mind.

Other things happen to the Younger family, racist things, just because they are black.

But the rift between Lena and Walter Lee is the central tension running like an electrified spine through Lorraine Hansberry's 50-year-old play, "A Raisin in the Sun." The Virginia Stage Company production opens Friday at the Wells Theatre. The final preview takes place tonight.

For decades, theater experts have debated whose play this is: Walter Lee's or Lena's?

"I think it is the family's story," said Chris Hanna, artistic director of Virginia Stage and director of this production.

"It's about a family not being able to communicate with each other, living on top of each other and being seduced by what other Americans have."

Walter Lee wants to drive a big car and put pearls on his wife Ruth's neck. Ruth wants a decent home with some privacy.

"America is so wrapped up in dreams, and those dreams can inspire you and pull you forward, or they can cut your feet off," Hanna said. "For me, the play is about the struggle to become American, to join the table of what I referred to in our rehearsals as America's Thanksgiving table. Who is invited to the table in America, and who is not?"

Hanna, a first-generation Irish American, dubbed it "a post-Obama production. I became interested in doing the play at Obama's election."

He saw faces wearing an expression that said, "We've finally gotten here."

"And it raised the question," he said, "How long did it take to get here?" "

Still, Hanna, who is white, insisted that the play is not about race, although it features the constraints and cruelty of a racist America.

"Raisin" is set just before the start of the civil rights movement, possibly early 1955.

The Youngers' impending move into a white neighborhood is met with contempt. Both of Lena's children face obstacles to their goals. Walter Lee wants to open a liquor store but needs capital. Beneatha, her daughter, plans on becoming a physician, which seems a remote possibility from the vantage point of the family's South Side Chicago tenement.

Elain Graham, who plays Lena, researched the period as part of her preparation. In the first half of the 20th century, Chicago was the site of a black renaissance for jazz and literature, but also of racial tensions.

When Hansberry was young, her family moved into a house in a white section of Chicago, just like the Youngers, Graham said. After a brick was thrown through a window, just missing Lorraine, her folks moved out.

Graham, 59, grew up in a peaceably diverse section of Brooklyn. She did not experience much racism until 1962, when she was bused to all-white Bensonhurst, she said.

"I was very fortunate to not have been beaten up."

She considers Lena courageous to consider moving her family into an all-white enclave. But she relates to Beneatha, because she, too, wanted a career.

If the play were rewritten for today, it might show a big difference in "the way blacks think," she said, meaning an enlarged sense of possibilities. "That, and the strides we have made, educationally, professionally.

"It was a 360-degree turn for us, as a people, from 1954 to 2010. We pretty much live where we want. There's so much interracial dating and marriage and children. A lot has changed. Although there are still pockets where it hasn't."

As Walter Lee, Wendell Franklin relates to the character's fervent desire to provide well for his loved ones, he said.

"Here I am, having a family and trying to make a living as an actor."

Franklin, who is in his 30s, often stays in Manhattan; his family is in Pennsylvania.

"The play deals mostly with family, and what it means to really love someone," he said. "And what happens to dreams that are deferred."

They can dry up, as poet Langston Hughes wrote, "like a raisin in the sun."

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Source URL (retrieved on 04/01/2010 - 04:45): <http://hamptonroads.com/2010/03/vscs-raisin-sun-explores-american-dreams>