

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

By Lorraine Hansberry

Virginia Stage Company

Wells Theatre

“We get to know the Younger Family with looking-through-a-key-hole-reality and. . .

Hello, I’m Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

I’ll make full disclosure. I saw the original production of this land-mark drama, the first play written by a black woman on Broadway, in 1959. It was staged by the first black director, Lloyd Richards, who was destined to become the Dean of the Yale Drama School many years later.

I had grown up in segregated Houston, attended a university that was actively thinking about integration, and graduated from the school where Mr. Richards would eventually become dean. There were two black student playwrights there who stayed close to their typewriters. I had also served two years in the U.S. Army with black soldiers but we seemed to be isolated from each other. I had read about the life of black citizens in America and was strongly sympathetic to their cause. However, I had no black friends or social intercourse with people of color or the vaguest idea of their every day lives. And, then I saw A Raisin in the Sun. The black writer, James Baldwin, stated most clearly the power of this play. He said, “Never before in the history of American Theatre had so much of black people’s lives been shown on the stage.”

Seeing this moving dramatic work again for the first time since 1959, I realized once more the impact it had on my life. Through vibrant, simple, honest and every day events, we get to know the Younger family with looking-through-a-key-hole reality and truth as they share their hearts and home with us. Their story of hope and deferred dreams is told with undercurrents of rage and bitterness but also with enduring feelings of family love and considerable wit. Hansberry’s dialogue has a lyrical beauty about it and she nails the frustration and plight of the black race in this family that comes from five generations of slaves and sharecroppers.

The Youngers are due to receive a \$10,000.00 insurance windfall. Once the check is in their hands, the clashes over dreams and the struggle of how to spend this vast amount of money almost destroy them as they attempt to escape from the roach infested tenement where they live. We are left with hope that their dreams just might eventually come true but not without further struggle.

Director Chris Hanna has created, for the most part, an effective ensemble of players who bring searing emotional life to these people who have been given nothing but dreams and a check. Wendell B. Franklin, as Walter Lee Younger, the son of the deceased patriarch reveals the “tied in knots” intensity and keenly felt inner life that I remember Sidney Poitier having in the original. As his mother, Elain Graham performs with similar controlled power. Daughter Beneatha, a budding feminist possessed by a raging intellectual curiosity with a dream of becoming a doctor, might be a little too restrained as portrayed by Nicole Gant. Matthew Cabbil and Axel Avin, Jr. are excellent as two young men from different social strata. Lisa Renee Pitts as Walter Lee’s long suffering wife has moving moments of pathos and humor. Mark Curtis as a not so subtle bigot gives complexity and dimension to the man, Karl Linder.

As an ironic statement in the opening scene, Director Hanna has introduced a contemporary rendition of “America the Beautiful” that seemed too obvious and unnecessary to me. Set, lighting and costumes by Terry Summers Flint, A. Nelson Rugger IV and Jeni Schaefer give a good sense of time and place.

We often hear about the Golden Years of American Theatre in the fifties. Here’s a fine example of the way it used to be on the Great White Way.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I’ll see you at the next opening.