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## Virginia Stage Company presents "A Raisin in the Sun"

[By David Nicholson](#)

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Playwright Lorraine Hansberry died tragically young at 34 of cancer. But she left behind one of the 20th century's great works of the theater, "A Raisin in the Sun." Premiering in 1959, it won the New York Drama Circles Award for Best American Play and ran for two years.

Fifty years later, Chris Hanna is mounting this seminal work at Virginia Stage Company. Looking back on Hansberry and her contribution, the director marvels at how well the play stands up today.

"It's frighteningly contemporary," says Hanna, the stage company's artistic director and director of this production onstage through April 18. "Every day in rehearsal, we look at each other and ask, 'How did she know that?' It is only a better play 50 years later."

Had Hansberry lived longer — she was born in 1930 and died in 1965 — she might be compared today with Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, he says.

Like any great work, "A Raisin in the Sun" survives because it can be appreciated on many different levels. Hansberry writes about the Youngers, an African-American family living in a South Chicago neighborhood in the 1950s.

The family is about to receive a \$10,000 insurance payment from the death of Mr. Younger, and each member of the family has a different idea of how to spend the money. Mama Younger, the family matriarch, wants to buy a house. Her son, Walter Lee, wants to invest in a liquor store with his friends. And daughter Beneatha wants to use the money to pay for her medical school tuition.

In the 1950s the focus of this play might have been viewed as an African-American family's desire to improve their lives. In fact, Hansberry's work came out of her family's legal battle against racially segregated housing laws in the Washington Park subdivision of Chicago. The title of the play was inspired by a line from a Langston Hughes poem, "Harlem: A Dream Deferred," that says, "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

In today's "post-Obama" world, as Hanna calls it, "A Raisin in the Sun" also can be viewed in a broader context.

"While the racial issue is still relevant, now it's more about these people joining the American conversation," he says. Family dynamics come to the forefront in what Hanna describes as the "continual tear between mother and children, and how children gain independence from their parents. The central struggle is between mother and son, and the young man is very angry."

"A Raisin in the Sun" is the stage company's selection for "Minds Wide Open," a statewide initiative of events happening between now and June that celebrates the contribution of women artists to arts and culture.

"We were committed to joining the Minds Wide Open celebration and I started thinking about women in the theater who have made a significant difference," says Hanna. "It was the first play by an African-American female to be performed on Broadway."

### **Want to go?**

*What:* Virginia Stage Company's "A Raisin in the Sun"

*When:* Dress rehearsal at 7 tonight. Preview performances at 7 p.m. Tuesday and 8 p.m. Wednesday-Thursday. Opening night is 8 p.m. Friday with additional performances through April 18.

*Where:* Wells Theatre, Tazewell Street and Monticello Avenue, Norfolk

*Tickets:* \$10 dress rehearsal, \$15 previews and \$28-\$50 regular performances through Ticketmaster or online at [www.vastage.com](http://www.vastage.com). Call 627-1234 for information.

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