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# APPLAUSE

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ALSO PLAYING...

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**A RAISIN**  
**IN THE SUN**

# PASSING THE MANTLE



**Lydia Diamond tells us what  
*A Raisin in the Sun* meant to her  
as a young, gifted and black playwright**

BY LYDIA DIAMOND

Fifty years ago, a young playwright stood at the back of a dark theatre, holding the hand of her producer, as the curtain rose on her Broadway premiere. It was the first play written by a black woman to play to a Broadway audience. The play was *A Raisin in the Sun*, the playwright, Lorraine Hansberry, the producer, Philip Rose, and the director, a very young Lloyd Richards.

As the lights rose on the talented cast, including Sidney Poitier and Ruby Dee, every person in the audience could feel the electricity, the shared understanding that history was being made. Now, thousands of productions, many translations and several films later, we begin to understand why this work has become an American treasure. Audiences fell in love with the Youngers, a proud family living in a small apartment on Chicago's Southside in the late 1950s. The Youngers deal

with generational clashes, the reality of being black and poor in a segregated America, personal ambition and a desire for a better life—all with humor, faith and honesty.

I first encountered Lorraine Hansberry's work in high school. I fancied myself an actor and was always searching for what seemed to me obscure plays authored by, or written for, a young black woman. I am appalled, but hardly shocked, that in the late 1980s, I'd have stumbled upon *A Raisin in the Sun* and thought it a discovery. In my defense, the canon exposed to a black girl in Texas in the mid-1980s was decidedly white, male and dead.... And we didn't have the Internet.

It would be years before I'd become acquainted with Lorraine Hansberry's celebrated body of work, including the controversial *The Drinking Gourd*, the

barrier-breaking *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* and *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, an inspiring collection of writings, scenes and artwork posthumously assembled by her former husband, Robert Nemiroff.

At some point during my young adulthood, I forgot the importance of this woman who died too early and left an indelible mark, and this play that truly is one of the most important works written for the American theatre. Like so many young artists, I was exploring the boundaries of storytelling, breaking traditional theatrical structure and quite pleased with myself. I did not yet realize how firmly *A Raisin in the Sun* and Lorraine Hansberry had lodged themselves into my subconscious, ultimately emboldening me, encouraging me, influencing every part of my aesthetic.

(As an embarrassing aside, you should know that Lorraine even influenced my sense of fashion; she would cringe at this, as personal aesthetics was always the least of her concerns; more than famous models and actors, Lorraine, with her pencil slacks and tailored suits was, for me, the symbol of urbane sophistication.)

Picture Lorraine Hansberry if you will. Imagine, a young black woman, refined and poised, worldly and smart as a whip. Smarter than smart, “Wicked Smart!” my Boston neighbors would say. This young woman is aware of her otherness, as a black woman in her segregated country, as a woman among male intellectuals and artists, as a person of relative privilege among the masses of blacks denied access only because of their blackness. This was a woman whose heroes were Toussaint L’Ouverture, Langston Hughes, Sojourner Truth, Sean O’Casey, Shakespeare and Paul Robeson; a woman who studied with W.E.B. Du Bois, hung out with, defended and debated James Baldwin, held court with President Kennedy and Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister of Ghana after its independence.

Regularly, artist friends of mine and I debate the true relevance of the work we do. How do artists make a difference in the most troubled of times? How do

theatre artists speak to a world when an evening at the theatre can easily cost a small fortune (dinner, baby-sitter, transportation)? To whom then are we speaking?

This was not a dilemma for Lorraine. She was a committed social justice activist, writing for and eventually editing the very leftist *Freedom*, an intellectual monthly founded by Paul Robeson. She traveled as an Ambassador for America to Africa, insisted on integrated audiences and fair ticket prices for her plays, worked tirelessly, was often misunderstood by those she most identified with and marginalized by those who’d elevated her. I suspect that the time she spent in the trenches would have made the time to engage in philosophical musings about her own relevance, well, irrelevant at best.

I generally don’t write articles. I write plays. I teach playwriting to brilliant young people at Boston University and have been told I do it well. More than an intellectual, I fancy myself a practitioner. I imagine and build plays in which form is most often dictated by character, in which the politic is born of the story; plays that are political mostly because, in this country, discussions of class and race and sexuality are still strangely politically charged.

A humble nod here to Ms. Hansberry. Because she and her contemporaries walked through the fire, my contemporaries and I have had the luxury of casually sighting our goals as first artistic, and then, tangentially political. The activist-artist has often shifted to artist-activist, and we turn to Ms. Hansberry to challenge us and keep us honest. If ever there was a time to take up the mantle and remember the importance of theatre as a transformative space in which to celebrate humanity, invoke laughter and inspire empathy and action, it is now. As we dangerously teeter into self-congratulatory notions of post-racial America, we must look closely at ourselves, as artists, audiences, Americans and open ourselves up to Lorraine’s passion, dedication, conviction and grace, pushing always for more.

It is her art that keeps us coming back. We know these people that populate her plays. We know the Youngers, we understand these familial relationships,

even viewing the political reality through a historical lens, we feel the urgency and celebrate the humanity.

I leave you with Ms. Hansberry’s own words: “...ours is a complex and difficult country and some of our complexities are indeed grotesque... it is also a great nation with certain beautiful and indestructible traditions and potentials which can be seized by all of us who possess imagination and love of man... Vulgarity, blind conformity and mass lethargy need not triumph in the land of Lincoln and Frederick Douglass and Walt Whitman and Mark Twain. There is simply no reason why dreams should dry up like raisins or prunes or anything else in America. If you will permit me to say so, I believe we can *impose* beauty on our future...”

Thank you, Lorraine Hansberry. ■

**Lydia Diamond** is an award-winning playwright, professor at Boston University, Huntington Playwright Fellow, and a Resident Playwright at Chicago Dramatists. Her plays include: *Stick Fly*, *Voyeurs de Venus*, *Stage Black*, *Harriet Jacobs*, and the adaptation of *Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye*.

LYDIA DIAMOND



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## A RAISIN IN THE SUN

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American Sign Language interpreted and  
Audio Described performance • Oct 31, 1:30pm

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