A RAISIN IN THE SUN

The play *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry was first staged in 1959, a time when both Black consciousness and feminism belonged to the land of fantasy and fairy tales. It was, to say the very least, a carrier of revolutionary ideas and ideals.

The play revolves around the Youngers, a typical African-American family of the period between World War II and the radical ‘60s who lived in a ghetto in Chicago’s Southside. It chronicles the Younger’s struggles to find their place and purpose in this world without destroying the delicate relationships within their family.

The Youngers’ cramped apartment was the only setting where all the events of the play unfolded. This though was not a hindrance but even contributed to the sense of unity in the play.

Act One opens with the family waiting for the check Mama would be receiving as payment from her deceased husband’s insurance policy. We learn that Walter Lee, her son, had asked her repeatedly to entrust the money to him. He wants a better life for his wife, Ruth, and son, Travis, than the life in their apartment building where they have to wake up practically at the crack of dawn just to use the communal bathroom. He found no hope in his remaining a chauffeur all his life, so he was seduced into promising an acquaintance to go into business with him. Having no savings of his own, he does all that he can to get the money, even to the point of arguing with Mama.

Beneatha, Walter Lee’s sister, found this distasteful. After all, it *was* Mama’s money and not his. Walter argued that Beneatha shouldn’t expect Mama to keep some of the money to send her to med school, which he found frivolous. In his words: “If you so crazy ‘bout

messing ‘round with sick people—then go be a nurse like other women—or just get married and be quiet...”

Mama learns about the hurtful exchange of words between her two children from Ruth, Walter Lee’s wife. She then equates Walter Lee and Beneatha to the lone plant she keeps in a small pot on a window sill. The plant hardly gets any sunlight and yet it still manages to survive. Her children are like that, she says. They have spirit enough to survive even if they were forced to go on for so long without so many things.

As mama’s talk ends, Ruth faints to the floor in a mixture of physical fatigue, growing hopelessness about her mariage gone cold, and her soon-to-be-discovered pregnancy.

The check arrives the next day, and Walter Lee again tries to persuade Mama to give him the money to invest in a liquor store his acquaintance (a certain Willie Harris who his whole family distrusts) wants to open with him and another friend (Bobo). He flies into a rage when mama refuses him. He then turns away form Ruth when she tells him they need to talk. It is Mama who tells Walter Lee that his wife is pregnant and in her opinion is considering an abortion. Walter Lee refuses to believe that his wife is capable of even thinking about such a thing. Mama urges her son to ask Ruth not to go through with it, but Walter is unable to speak.

Act Two’s main features were Beneatha’s two beaux. The first is George who belongs to an affluent Black family. If only for this reason, Beneatha’s family favors George, but as the scenes featuring him proceed, we see less and less to like in him. For one, in a moment of exasperation with Beneatha, he complains about the “atmosphere” that is part of her routine. “You’re a nice looking girl,” he tells Beneatha. “That’s all you need, honey...

Guys aren't going to go for the atmosphere—they're going to go for what they see." Apart from this obvious chauvinistic crap, there is a big possibility that readers of the script won't be able to tell George is Black unless they are told. He is a "Colored White" if there is such a term, a man who takes pains to become as White as he can possibly be, given the color of his skin. If there was a way one can pay to change his race, this man would probably be first in line to get it.

Then there is Asagai, an idealist from Nigeria who went overseas for an education he hopes he can use to help his people. He reflects Beneatha's hopes and aspirations, the ones that are not only for herself, but for other people not as fortunate as she is. He is such that even when Beneatha's faith in her future was crumbling, he remained a believer that they will pull through.

Asagai is also Beneatha's tie to Africa, the motherland that she has never seen. Through him, she felt she learned what she needed to learn about Africa.

In a dialogue with her family, Mama announces that she had put some of her money on a house as downpayment. The problem is the house's location: Clybourne Park, a neighborhood whose residents are all White. Ruth warms up to the idea of a house of their own even if it was in Clybourne Park, but Walter Lee becomes furious. Because Mama spent money on that house, he thought there was nothing left over for him to invest in his friend's business. Through this act, Mama killed his dreams, he says.

It turns out that Mama did not spend all the money for the downpayment for the house. She entrusts her remaining money to Walter Lee. He is supposed to deposit part of it in the bank for Beneatha's education, and the rest, he can deposit in his name and to do with as he pleases. It is this unexpected act that heals Walter's relationships with his mother and

wife. Fred of his bitterness, he returns to the old Walter Lee who had a little hope in his heart to keep him going.

Seeing that her relationship with her husband isn't entirely hopeless, Ruth decides against the abortion.

But the Youngers' problems don't end there. Mrs. Johnson, their neighbor, visits them and congratulates them because she heard that they had a house to move into. Her sincerity though is dubious, especially when she tells the family about the bombings that have targeted Black families who have tried moving into "White" areas. There was more glee than warning in her voice when she was doing this.

And indeed, after Mrs. Johnson's departure, Beneatha couldn't help but comment, "If there are two things we, as a people, have got to overcome, one is the Ku Klux Klan—and the othe other is Mrs. Johnson." Amiri Baraka echoed this in his essay, "*A Critical Reevaluation*: A Raisin in the Sun's Enduring Passion": There is no such thing as a "White folks' neighborhood" except to racists and to those submitting to racism.

It is one thing to face discrimination in the eye of a White man, but it is another to face it in the likes of Mrs. Johnson who not only knows her place being Black (which she disclaimed, but nevertheless demonstrated), but also resented people of "her kind" who dare overstep their bounds.

A Mr. Linder comes to visit the Youngers as if to confirm Mrs. Johnson's "fears". Mr. Linder introduces himself as the chairman of Clybourne Park's so-called welcome committee. Upon hearing about the Younger's plan to move into their neighborhood, Mr. Linder saw a need to pay a visit to the family, for a dialogue. He goes on and on under the guise of goodwill, saying that there is such a great need for unsertanding between people like

the Youngers and White folk like him, and the only answer is to listen to each other. He then started to make his point, telling the Youngers that the people of Clybourne Park are not used to the idea of living with people of a different background from their own. What he really meant was, of course, was that his people isn't used to the idea of living with people of a different skin color. He then informs the Youngers that their association was ready to offer the Black family the return of their downpayment money plus an extra amount on the condition that they abandon their plans of moving into Clybourne Park. In a less than polite way, Walter Lee asks Mr. Linder to get out of their apartment.

In Mr. Linder therefore, Lorraine Hansberry was able to demonstrate that bigotry does not only come in the violent and noisy manner of the Ku Klus Klan, but it can also come in more subtle and gracious ways.

Shortly afterwards, Bobo, he friend Walter Lee was supposed to go into business with, comes for a visit. He informs Walter Lee that Willie Harris, the man they entrusted their money to, was gone, and he took their money with him. Walter Lee mourns for the money that was "made out of (his) father's flesh." Mama finds out that not only did Walter Lee give Willie Harris the money she had given him, but he also gave Harris the money intended for Beneatha's education.

In Act Three, Walter Lee calls Mr. Linder as a broken man, intending to accept the latter's offer. But he realizes that his parents have brought him up with more dignity than to stoop to that level. With renewed conviction, he announces to Mr. Linder that he intends to move his family to Clybourne Park regardless of what their "welcoming committee" thinks.

As the movers start to take their furniture, Mama survey their apartment one last time. Although there was a back garden waiting for her in their new home, she takes her little

potted plant, intending it to become a physical reminder of the kind of spirit that is in her children.

Truly, the play *A Raisin in the Sun* was ahead of its time. With the motley mixture of characters Lorraine Hansberry created, it presented a very honest and complete look into the lives of African Americans not only in Chicago's Southside but of possibly Everytown, U.S.A. With the Youngers, she took us inside the homes and hearts of her people.

Walter Lee is easily the embodiment of every ambitious Black man who has spent what seems like several lifetimes working as someone else's servant. At some point, a man such as Walter Lee realizes that servitude should not even be considered a job, much less a career, and he starts dreaming for more. For something that not only would provide a better future for him and his family, but fulfillment and pride as well. But given the forces which work against him (bigotry, lack of education), he becomes a fish swimming upstream. A weaker man might break, and it seemed Walter Lee was being pulled into that, but he perseveres, finding that in spite—or maybe because of—who he is, he does have some dignity inside him which refuses to let him bow down to the people who oppress him. At the beginning of the play, he thought that money makes the world go around, but in the end, dignity and pride became his whole world. These gave him the strength and courage to move into what most people of that time thought of as a forbidden zone for a man of his color.

But where Walter Lee's biggest hindrance is his being Black, Beneatha has two things working for her: her being Black and her being a woman. First, I believe she had to resolve some of her confusion about her identity as a Black youth. Beneatha employed the help of Asagai, who is from Nigeria. Her own family had not seen Africa for five generations, and with her link to someone who actually grew up there, Beneatha hoped to

create ties with her "Motherland" in some form or another. But gathering from the forceful way she accosted Asagai after finding out that he hails from Nigeria, this was a largely unheard of thing at that time. Therefore, the efforts of a Black youth to find his identity such as Beneatha did through gathering knowledge about Africa was a revolutionary idea as well.

Learning to be more proud about her Black heritage gave Beneatha more confidence in herself as a woman. In the past, she was forced to conform to the Western ideal of beauty which included straight hair, something which is not natural to an African American like her. Acquiring even the most basic understanding of the standards of beauty of her native Africa gave her a frame of mind which refused to let her apologize for her natural looks. She stopped straightening her hair and let people see her with the kind of hair she was born with. Although it was an unpopular decision (at that time, extravagant Afros had not become a fad yet), she stood by it.

Beneatha had dreams for herself, one of which was becoming a doctor—a virtually unheard of thing in those times for a woman, much less a Black woman. Although many of the people around her (the men, especially—among them Walter Lee and George, one of her beaux) told her to give up her dream, she stood her ground. Without her knowing it, even though the term wasn't born yet, she embodied the feminists' fight.

I believe Ruth and Mama can, in the surface, be considered the most "universal" members of the Younger family. They can be either Black or White, or any color in between, if the reader is given just their general situations. Ruth, of whom the playwright prophesized that "in a few years, will be known among her people as a 'settled woman'," is your typical housewife whose only purpose in life is to take care of her husband and children.

Mama is your typical matriarch who at any opportunity tries to control her family with all the styles of a tyrant.

But in this last point, I was only echoing the words of Ossie Davis, whom I assume has never been and never will be a part of a minority ethnic group. In his introduction to the book of the play, Robert Nemiroff has this to say about Davis: "... White America 'kidnapped' Mama, stole her away and used her fantasized image to avoid what was uniquely African American in the play. And what it was saying." I believe the same thing can also be said of Ruth to some extent.

If we follow Mr. Davis' line of thinking, we would have to discount as just a dash of "local color" the scene wherein Beneatha and Walter Lee dances to African music while the former was in Nigerian robes (Act Two, Scene One), maybe written just to put a little interest and movement in the scene. But to a displaced minority who at one point or other had tried to find his identity in a culture he had never known, this scene can never be just "local color". It is a chance to connect with a culture which had been, for the most part, real only in his imagination.

It is dangerous to generalize this play and read the Youngers as an embodiment of Middle Class America. This may please pushers of a canon which revels in universality of a text, but it discounts the possibility of a text recording a unique experience of a specific group of people.

And this is the essence of *A Raisin in the Sun.* It chronicles the African American experience of that time. Without this, I doubt if *Raisin* could have created this much interest that a movie, musical and teleplay versions had been produced, apart from revivals in dozens of regional theaters.