

A NOTE ABOUT HANSBERRY'S NOTES

By Madeleine George, Playwright in Residence



Lorraine Hansberry

If we know *A Raisin in the Sun*, we may think we know Lorraine Hansberry. We know that her play is a masterpiece of structure and characterization so brilliant it became an instant classic when it premiered. We know that the play draws on various parts of the playwright's autobiography for its milieu, characters, and political drive. And we know that the play has the same gravitas that Hansberry herself embodied: whenever she spoke in public—whether in interviews, as in the moving conversation she held in 1959 with Studs Terkel (<http://studsterkel.wfmt.com/blog/tag/lorraine-hansberry/>), or in speeches, as in this impassioned address on Black revolution and White backlash she gave at a town hall meeting in 1964 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wqxjc7PULJ8>)—her political fierceness was matched by her personal composure. She was a graceful radical: discerning, incisive, and uncompromising.

But in the privacy of her own notebooks, Lorraine Hansberry was refreshingly ambivalent and searching, honest about her secret personal life and the self-doubt and loneliness that she struggled with for years. I first encountered her lists of Likes and Hates, which she

compiled annually on her birthday from the time that she was 23 until 32, in an exhibit of her letters at the Brooklyn Museum, *Twice Militant: Lorraine Hansberry's Letters to "The Ladder"* (2013). The exhibit was primarily concerned with Hansberry's anonymous letters to "The Ladder," a subscription-only periodical for lesbians founded in 1956. But the curators also included a number of the playwright's personal notes and lists, each more frank, funny, and poignant than the last. The lists are sometimes petty, sometimes grandiose, sometimes intentionally silly. Written for an audience of one, they read like spending private time with the writer, over a glass of her favorite Scotch.

For example, in 1960, at age 29, Hansberry's "I LIKE" column includes:

Mahalia Jackson's music

...

getting dressed up

being admired for my looks

...

Shakespeare

...

that first drink of Scotch

and

older women

Under "I HATE" she lists:

Being asked to speak

Speaking

Too much mail

My loneliness

...

stupidity

...

Racism

People who defend it

...

Seeing my picture

Reading my interviews

...

death

pain

cramps

being hung over

and

Sneaky love affairs

**Intriguingly, “My
homosexuality” makes
both lists this year.
By 1962, when she’s 32,
Hansberry still likes**

the first Scotch

...

the inside of a lovely woman’s
mouth

...

Parts of the lingering memory
of a betrayer

**And now a new, more painful
category emerges:**

I regret

*That love is really as elusive as
everybody over 30 knows it to
be*

...

My consuming loneliness

*All the friggin’ hurts in this
world*

But she is also “proud”

*that I am losing some of these
fears*

that I struggle to work

hard

against many, many things

and on my own

of my people

**And she “should
like”**

**to be utterly,
utterly in love**

**to work and finish
something**

The world only had Lorraine Hansberry for another two and a half years after that. We only got three full-length plays from her. But in her notes to herself Hansberry lives again for us as a deeply passionate, utterly human artist, struggling to reconcile her great artistic and political ambitions with the limitations of her own mind and the world she lived in. For anyone who’s ever tried to make a meaningful piece of art, Lorraine Hansberry’s private expressions of self-doubt, jealousy, love, and fear bring her closer to us. They make her feel like one of us, not the omniscient, flawless mind that it seems like *A Raisin in the Sun* must have come from.



Lorraine Hansberry