

# New Jersey

MONTHLY

## A Radiant “Raisin in the Sun” in Red Bank

By Eric Levin

Lorraine Hansberry derived the title of her epochal 1959 play, “A Raisin in the Sun,” from the lines in Langston Hughes’s poem, “Harlem,” “What happens to a dream deferred?/Does it dry up/like a raisin in the sun?”

In the powerful production that opened last night at Two River Theater in Red Bank, the dream of racial acceptance and opportunity is not deferred but debated, dissected and vividly embodied.

The genius of the play and of this penetrating production is the way it unpacks the agony and ecstasy of the struggle. These unfold not just between the black family and the weaselly representative of the unwelcoming white community where the family matriarch buys a house, but between the black characters and within each of them as individuals.

The performances are magnificent. Brandon J. Dirden as Walter Lee Younger, the son in whom the dream burns most fiercely, shows his remarkable range, from hulking intensity to sly humor, sinuous sensuality and an ability to register shock and pain that will reach the last row of the theater.

Dirden’s real-wife wife, Crystal A. Dickinson, plays Walter Lee’s wife, Ruth, with her own blend of ferocity, vulnerability, tenderness and charm. Dirden’s real-life father, Willie Dirden, a veteran actor, appears in a crucial cameo as Walter Lee’s hapless friend and delivers devastating news in a gut-wrenching scene.

The matriarch, Lena Younger, is a woman not to be trifled with. As played by Brenda Pressley, she will stare down anyone when she decides to dig in her heels, but she is no tyrant.

Moreover, her sense of duty, hard work and loving support extends even to a sickly plant on the windowsill. She loves her loved ones the most when they seem to deserve it least, and she also can have a mighty fine time just fooling around.

Walter Lee’s younger sister, Beneatha (a dynamic Jasmine Batchelor), seems to presage a time yet to come. Only her mother takes her dream of becoming a doctor seriously. Her fascination with African culture and heritage (fostered by the Nigerian intellectual Asagai, played with casual wit by Charlie Hudson III) shows Hansberry’s anticipatory acumen.

In a way, the most challenging role is that of Karl Lindner, the nervous representative of the white community “Improvement Society” who tries to dissuade the Youngers (“you people”) from buying the house without coming right out and saying they are unwelcome because they are black. Lindner is a racist trying to present himself as a man wanting to have a “conversation with reasonable people” for the betterment of all.

Nat DeWolf deserves enormous praise for making Lindner not just pathetic and nervous and patronizing, but a believable person of his time rather than a mere cartoon. Which is not to say the audience doesn't get several satisfying chuckles from his contemptible plight.

Back to the play's title. The final scene is fraught yet hopeful. I don't know why Hansberry chose the title, but here's my reflection on it:

A raisin is a grape shriveled in the sun. It seems passive and helpless under the sun's merciless glare. The grape, plump and fresh, starts out flush with the bright juice of youth. The raisin surrenders something to gain something. It ultimately outlasts the grape. It becomes sweeter as it toughens.

The characters in "Raisin" are similarly toughened by loss. Their innocence evaporates. Their sweetness intensifies as they protectively pull it deeper into the core of their beings.