

# Out **IN** Jersey

## “A Raisin in the Sun”: Who gets the keys to the American dream?

By Allen Neuner



Crystal A. Dickinson (Ruth Younger), Brenda Pressley (Lena Younger) and Owen Tabaka (Travis Younger) in "A Raisin in the Sun" at Two River Theater.

Two River Theatre in Red Bank has mounted a moving production of Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, to begin their 2017-2018 season.

Lansberry's play introduces us to the Younger family of Chicago. Matriarch Lena, whose husband has recently passed away, is awaiting the arrival of his life insurance check. The money means different things to Lena and her two children. For son Walter Lee, it is the key to his dream of escaping his job as a chauffeur and owning his own liquor store. Daughter Beneatha sees her dream of becoming a doctor being made easier. Lena, dreaming of a way to secure her family's future, decides to purchase a house, getting them out of their hopelessly cramped three-room apartment. The repercussions of her decision drive the play forward, bringing the audience along on an incredible, moving experience.

Director Carl Cofield guides a stellar cast in this tale of blacks in early 1950's Chicago. Brenda Pressley's performance as Lena is a revelation, filled with love both tender and tough, and a hard-earned wisdom, which is, as she says, the product of five generations of slaves and sharecroppers. That wisdom and that love guide her vision of what will make a better life for her family and make her the solid emotional center of the play.

Pressley's performance is matched by Brandon J. Dirden's volcanic portrayal of Walter Lee, agonized by the fear that his own dreams of making a better life for himself and his family will die around him, stranding him in a job he hates for the rest of his life. Dirden's off-stage wife, Crystal A. Dickinson, plays Ruth, Walter Lee's wife, a woman who bears the brunt of her husband's frustrations and fears her love is no longer enough to support him. Jasmine Batchelor's Beneatha is an independent force, a prototype of the women who led the battles for civil rights and women's rights in later decades, yet with a self-righteous streak that puts her at odds with her family. Charlie Hudson III and York Walker offer Ms. Batchelor strong support as her two suitors: Asagai, a Nigerian philosopher/activist who dreams of returning to lead his people to freedom; and George, a don't-rock-the-boat man for whom the term "male chauvinist pig" would be coined.



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The one flaw in an otherwise perfect cast is Nat DeWolf as Karl Lindner, a representative from the Youngers' new neighborhood. While the Youngers react to him with suspicion and guarded outrage, Mr. DeWolf's Lindner does not convey the sense of veiled menace and unstated white privilege that would make the play's final scenes more electrifying.

The magnificent set of the Younger's weary-looking apartment, complete with communal bathroom in the hallway and staircase to the street, is the creation of twin scenic designers Christopher Swader and Justin Swader. A painted brick wall Coca-Cola sign set above and behind the apartment, faded by the years, evokes inner city buildings of the early 1950's. Karin Graybash's costumes superbly recall the styles and fashions of the people and the times.



Brandon J. Dirden (Walter Lee Younger), Crystal A. Dickinson (Ruth Younger), Nat DeWolf (Karl Lindner) and Jasmine Batchelor (Beneatha Younger) in “A Raisin in the Sun”

*A Raisin in the Sun*, its title taken from Langston Hughes’ 1951 poem “Harlem”, is a play of dreams and hopes trying to survive in a world of harsh realities. It is a play that speaks of family – of what unites it even while its members may be divided. It is a play that will touch all audience members with its honesty, passion, and humor. It is, above all, a play of human dignity. I urge you to make the trip to Red Bank’s Two River Theatre to see *A Raisin in the Sun*. *A Raisin in the Sun* is presented by Two River Theatre in Red Bank through October 8th, 2017. For tickets and information, visit [tworivertheater.org](http://tworivertheater.org)