

# The Star-Ledger

## Fueled by a dazzling lead, 'Raisin in the Sun' soars in Red Bank: review



Jasmine Batchelor (Beneatha Younger), Owen Tabaka (Travis Younger), Brenda Pressley (Lena Younger), Brandon J. Dirden (Walter Lee Younger) and Crystal A. Dickinson (Ruth Younger) in "A Raisin in the Sun" at Two River Theater in Red Bank. (T Charles Erickson)

By Patrick Maley For NJ Advance Media

RED BANK -- In 1959, Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" rocked the theater world with its realist vision of black American life and uncompromising examination of the complex humans at its center. More than half a century later, the play has become an enduring classic while establishing itself as a challenge for theater companies. Productions often slip into maudlin sentimentality, or allow the domineering presence of Walter Lee Younger to overpower and mute the depth of his cast-mates.

Not so in Red Bank: under the discerning direction of Carl Cofield, Two River Theater's production of Hansberry's masterpiece proves lush in its portrait of a family enduring through

crisis. A collection of excellent individual performances coalesces into a symphonic ensemble, confidently combing the depth of Hansberry's rich play.

To some degree, "A Raisin in the Sun" is about the clash of two opposing forces: thirty-five-year-old Walter Lee Younger (Brandon J. Dirden) yearns for a life of dignified self-sufficiency but cannot break out of the home or shadow of his mother Lena (Brenda Pressley), who provides love and support, but also a firm vision for how best her family's life should be conducted. The anticipated arrival of a \$10,000 life-insurance payout for the recent death of Big Walter Younger brings this tension to a head.

Walter Lee wants to invest the money in a liquor store, but Lena refuses. These two share a cramped Chicago apartment (rendered here intricately and inventively by Christopher Swader and Justin Swader) with Walter's wife Ruth (Crystal A. Dickinson), son Travis (10-year-old Owen Tabaka), and sister Beneatha (Jasmine Batchelor), a college student with designs on medical school. Both Walter Lee and Lena want to use the insurance money as a means for a better life for the whole family, but their visions for how that should be done diverge widely. At stake is less the money than the leadership of the Younger family and the fate of Walter Lee's burning drive for a new future for him and his family.



Brandon J. Dirden (Walter Lee Younger), Crystal A. Dickinson (Ruth Younger), Brenda Pressley (Lena Younger) and Owen Tabaka (Travis Younger) in A Raisin in the Sun at Two River Theater in Red Bank. (T Charles Erickson)

However, "A Raisin in the Sun" is about so much more than battle of wills between mother and son, and Cofield's production tends fully to the play's nuances. Walter Lee is a complex, fascinating character whose intricacies shine forth in the hands of a powerful actor like Dirden, but Cofield fits the explosive presence of Walter Lee neatly within the play's broader tapestry.

Batchelor's Beneatha, for instance, comes to full life in her defiant determination, and Dickinson gives a warm, moving performance as the long-enduring Ruth. Pressley leads Lena confidently through a broad range of registers: she is at once a doting grandmother, nurturing caretaker, firm matriarch, clear-eyed pragmatist, and a moral touchstone.

This production is in fact most striking in its successful rendering of Hansberry's feminine gaze. Two River has triumphed recently with a series of August Wilson productions (which the theater plans to continue through completion of Wilson's full Century Cycle), but "A Raisin in the Sun" offers a welcome interlude from Wilson's very masculine world. Some of the play's best scenes feature Pressley, Batchelor, and Dickinson together, each presenting a woman at a different stage of life bearing the experiences of her unique journey on her shoulders. Hansberry looked with deep introspection on the manifold challenges and joys of black American femininity, and this production attends skillfully to the playwright's vision.

Ultimately, Cofield and his team remind us why "A Raisin in the Sun" is a classic of the American stage that remains timely in its politics and surprisingly radical in its rendition of the Younger family. This is a production that captures and renders vivid the essence of Hansberry's achievement.

A RAISIN IN THE SUN  
Two River Theater Company  
21 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank

**Tickets:** available online (<http://www.tworivertheater.org/>). Running through October 8.