

Talkin' BROADWAY

Regional Reviews: New Jersey / Delaware Valley

A Raisin in the Sun

Two River Theater
Review by Cameron Kelsall



**Brandon J. Dirden, Crystal A. Dickinson,
Brenda Pressley, and Owen Tabaka**
Photo by T. Charles Erickson

Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* has never stopped being relevant. That's its brilliance and its tragedy. The most recent Broadway revival, in 2014, coincided with the publication of Ta-Nehisi Coates' "The Case for Reparations," which highlighted predatory housing practices used to keep people of color living in poverty. The real people in Coates' essay could have easily been the Youngers, who pin their hopes and dreams to a system that's fundamentally stacked against them. Three years later, *Raisin* has returned to the New York metro area in a stirring Two River Theater production directed by Carl Cofield. I trust I don't need to tell you why the story still resonates at our current political climate.

Despite its evergreen status, *A Raisin in the Sun* can be a hard play to pull off. The central role of Walter Lee Younger requires an actor who can communicate the character's complex personality. Hansberry wrote Walter Lee with a fair amount of pluck and charisma, but a successful performance achieves more than bombast; we also have to see his striving nature and his wounded pride. But the play is not just one man's journey, and a successful production needs strong actors in the roles of Lena, the Younger family matriarch; Ruth, Walter Lee's pragmatic wife; and Beneatha, a young woman with ambitions to rise above the expectations placed on her gender and her race. Hansberry further tempers her powerful story with humor, making tonal balance all the more important.

For the most part, Cofield manages to fuse these elements as well as I've ever seen. Much credit goes to the casting of Brandon J. Dirden and Brenda Pressley as Walter Lee and Lena. These characters represent opposite views of the American dream; when a life insurance check provides a much-needed infusion of cash, Walter Lee views it as his ticket out of menial labor and into the business class, while Lena longs to settle the family in a safe and respectable home. Christopher Swader and Justin Swader's remarkably detailed set perfectly captures the tenement world from which Lena wishes to extract her family—particularly her beloved grandson Travis (played with winning spunk by 10-year-old Owen Tabaka).

But Walter Lee is a man used to getting his way, as shown in Dirden's fascinating and surprising performance. Walter Lee can come across as a classic nogoodnik, a drunkard looking for just the right get-rich-quick scheme. In contrast, Dirden and Cofield take a distinctly psychological approach. Here, he becomes an overgrown mama's boy, a coddled prince whose reality hasn't quite matched the adulation he receives at the family hearth. It's an interpretation supported by the text—"He finally came into his manhood today," Lena says at the end of the play, suggesting a prolonged adolescence—but it still feels startling and fresh. This is exactly what I love to see in a revival: a surprising take on a familiar role that makes a lot of dramaturgical sense. Pressley, too, offers a Lena more vibrant and vital than usual. She projects a sense of calm control, a surety in her vision of her family's future. She sees herself as the custodian of her late husband's dreams, now able to support the family in ways that he never could. This clarity makes Lena's act two breakdown, which occurs after Walter Lee betrays her trust, as devastating as I've ever seen it.

Crystal A. Dickinson brings a quiet dignity to Ruth, and Jasmine Batchelor infuses Beneatha with humor, warmth, and depth. York Walker and Charlie Hudson III both do excellent work as Beneatha's suitors—a snobbish college boy from a wealthy family and a Nigerian national who urges her to embrace her true identity. I had forgotten some of the more forward-looking elements of the play, as when Asagai (Hudson) encourages Beneatha to wear her hair "as it grows" and reject assimilationism.

If the production has one misstep, it's in portraying Karl Lindner (Nat DeWolf), the sole white character, as a panto villain. Lindner represents the "Clybourne Park Welcoming Committee," a group of concerned citizens from the all-white neighborhood where the Youngers have bought property. He visits their cold water flat, intent on stopping their move. "Negro families are happier when they live in their *own* communities," he banally intones. For Lindner, that's merely a statement of fact. But DeWolf's mustache-twirling line reading obscures Hansberry's point: that racism and evil are often communicated insidiously, a fact that remains as true as ever. Hansberry died in 1965 at the age of thirty-four. She left behind only two major plays. It's impossible not to dwell on the force in dramatic literature she might have been. But as a life's work, *A Raisin in the Sun* stands shoulder to shoulder with the greatest plays ever written. At Two River Theater, Cofield, Dirden, and Pressley honor her legacy.

A Raisin in the Sun continues through Sunday, October 9, 2017, at Two River Theater, 70 Bridge Avenue, Red Bank NJ. Tickets (\$20-70) can be purchased online at tworivertheater.org or by calling 732-345-1400.