LORRAINE HANSBERRY
With an Introduction by Robert Nemiroff

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

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—*Washington Post*

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To Mama:
in gratitude for the dream

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INTRODUCTION

by Robert Nemiroff*

This is the most complete edition of *A Raisin in the Sun* ever published. Like the American Playhouse production for television, it restores to the play two scenes unknown to the general public, and a number of other key scenes and passages staged for the first time in twenty-fifth anniversary revivals and, most notably, the Roundabout Theatre's Kennedy Center production on which the television picture is based.

"The events of every passing year add resonance to *A Raisin in the Sun*. It is as if history is conspiring to make the play a classic"; "… one of a handful of great American dramas … *A Raisin in the Sun* belongs in the inner circle, along with *Death of a Salesman, Long Day's Journey into Night*, and *The Glass Menagerie."* So wrote *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post* respectively of Harold Scott's revelatory stagings for the Roundabout in which most of these elements, cut on Broadway, were restored. The unprecedented resurgence of the work (a dozen regional revivals at this writing, new publications and productions abroad, and now the television production that will be seen by millions) prompts the new edition.

Produced in 1959, the play presaged the revolution in black and women's consciousness—and the revolutionary ferment in Africa—that exploded in the years following the playwright's death in 1965 to ineradicably alter the social fabric and consciousness of the nation and the world. As so many have commented lately, it did so in a manner and to an extent that few could have foreseen, for not only the restored material, but much else that passed unnoticed in the play at the time, speaks to issues that are now inescapable: value systems of the black family; concepts of African American beauty and identity; class and generational conflicts; the relationships of husbands and wives, black men and women; the outspoken (if then yet unnamed) feminism of the daughter; and, in the penultimate scene between Beneatha and Asagai, the larger statement of the play—and the ongoing struggle it portends.

Not one of the cuts, it should be emphasized, was made to dilute or censor the play or to "soften" its statement, for everyone in that herculean, now-legendary band that brought *Raisin* to Broadway—and most specifically the producer, Philip Rose, and director, Lloyd Richards —*believed* in the importance of that statement with a degree of commitment that would have countenanced nothing of the kind. How and why, then, did the cuts come about?

The scene in which Beneatha unveils her natural haircut is an interesting example. In 1959, when the play was presented, the rich variety of Afro styles introduced in the mid-sixties had not yet arrived: the very few black women who wore their hair unstraightened cut it very short. When the hair of Diana Sands (who created the role) was cropped in this fashion, however, a few days before the opening, it was not contoured to suit her: her particular facial structure required a fuller Afro, of the sort she in fact adopted in later years. Result? Rather than vitiate the playwright's point—the beauty of black hair—the scene was dropped.

Some cuts were similarly the result of happenstance or unpredictables of the kind that occur in any production: difficulties with a scene, the "processes" of actors, the dynamics of staging, etc. But most were related to the length of the play: running time. Time in the context of bringing to Broadway the first play by a black (young and unknown) woman, to be directed, moreover, by another unknown black "first," in a theater were black audiences virtually did not exist—and where, in the entire history of the American stage, there had never been a serious *commercially successful* black drama!

So unlikely did the prospects seem in that day, in fact, to all but Phil Rose and the company, that much as some expressed admiration for the play, Rose's eighteen-month effort to find a co-producer to help complete the financing was turned down by virtually every established name in the business. He was joined at the last by another newcomer, David Cogan, but even with the money in hand, not a single theater owner on the Great White Way would *rent* to the new production! So that when the play left New York for tryouts—with a six-hundred-dollar advance in New Haven and no theater to come back to—had the script and performance been any less ready, and the response of critics and audiences any less unreserved than they proved to be, *A Raisin in the Sun*

would never have reached Broadway.

Under these circumstances the pressures were enormous (if unspoken and rarely even acknowledged in the excitement of the work) *not* to press fate unduly with unnecessary risks. And the most obvious of these was the running time. It is one thing to present a four-and-a-half-hour drama by Eugene O'Neill on Broadway—but a *first* play (even ignoring the special features of this one) in the neighborhood of even *three*??? By common consensus, the need to keep the show as tight and streamlined as possible was manifest. Some things—philosophical flights, nuances the general audience might not understand, shadings, embellishments—would have to be sacrificed.

At the time the cuts were made (there were also some very good ones that focused and strengthened the drama), it was assumed by all that they would in no way significantly affect or alter the statement of the play, for there is nothing in the omitted lines that is not implicit elsewhere in, and throughout, *A Raisin in the Sun*. But to think this was to reckon without two factors the future would bring into play. The first was the swiftness and depth of the revolution in consciousness that was coming and the consequent, perhaps inevitable, tendency of some people to assume, because the "world" had changed, that *any* "successful" work which preceded the change must embody the values they had outgrown. And the second was the nature of the American audience.

James Baldwin has written that "Americans suffer from an ignorance that is not only colossal, but sacred." He is referring to that apparently endless capacity we have nurtured through long years to deceive ourselves where race is concerned: the baggage of myth and preconception we carry with us that enables northerners, for example, to shield themselves from the extent and virulence of segregation in the North, so that each time an "incident" of violence so egregious that they cannot look past it occurs they are "shocked" anew, as if it had never happened before or as if the problem were largely passé. (In 1975, when the cast of *Raisin*, the musical, became involved in defense of a family whose home in Queens, New York City, had been fire-bombed, we learned of a 1972 City Commissioner of Human Rights Report, citing "eleven cases *in the last eighteen months* in which minority-owned homes had been set afire or vandalized, a church had been bombed, and a school bus had been attacked"—in New York City!)

But Baldwin is referring also to the human capacity, where a work of art is involved, to substitute, for what the writer has written, what in our hearts we *wish* to believe. As Hansberry put it in response to one reviewer's enthusiastic if particularly misguided praise of her play: "… it did not disturb the writer in the least that there is no such implication in the entire three acts. He did not need it in the play; he had it in his head."[1]

Such problems did not, needless to say, stop America from embracing *A Raisin in the Sun*. But it did interfere drastically, for a generation, with the way the play was interpreted and assessed—and, in hindsight, it made all the more regrettable the abridgment (though without it would we even know the play today?). In a remarkable rumination on Hansberry's death, Ossie Davis (who succeeded Sidney Poitier in the role of Walter Lee) put it this way:

> The play deserved all this—the playwright deserved all this, and more. Beyond question! But I have a feeling that for all she got, Lorraine Hansberry never got all she deserved in regard to *A Raisin in the Sun*—that she got success, but that in her success she was cheated, both as a writer and as a Negro.
>
> One of the biggest selling points about *Raisin*—filling the grapevine, riding the word-of-mouth, laying the foundation for its wide, wide acceptance—was how much the Younger family was just like any other American family. Some people were ecstatic to find that "it didn't really have to be about Negroes at all!" It was, rather, a walking, talking, living demonstration of our mythic conviction that, underneath, all of us Americans, *color-ain't-got-nothing-to-do-with-it*, are pretty much alike. People are just people, whoever they are; and all they want is a chance to be like other people. This uncritical assumption, sentimentally held by the audience, powerfully fixed in the character of the powerful mother with whom everybody could identify, immediately and completely, made any other questions about the Youngers, and what living in the slums of Southside Chicago had done to them, not only irrelevant and impertinent, but also disloyal … because everybody who walked into the theater saw in Lena Younger … his own great American Mama. And that was decisive.[2]

In effect, as Davis went on to develop, white America "kidnapped" Mama, stole her away and used her fantasized image to avoid what was uniquely *African* American in the play. And what it was saying.

Thus, in many reviews (and later academic studies), the Younger family—maintained by two female domestics and a chauffeur, son of a laborer dead of a lifetime of hard labor—was transformed into an acceptably "middle class" family. The decision to move became a desire to "integrate" (rather than, as Mama says simply, "to find the nicest house for the least amount of money for my family.... Them houses they put up for colored in them areas way out always seem to cost twice as much.").

In his "A Critical Reevaluation: *A Raisin in the Sun*'s Enduring Passion," Amiri Baraka comments aptly: "We missed the essence of the work—that Hansberry had created a family on the cutting edge of the same class and ideological struggles as existed in the movement itself and among the people.... The Younger family is part of the black majority, and the concerns I once dismissed as 'middle class'—buying a home and moving into 'white folks' neighborhoods'—are actually reflective of the essence of black people's striving and the will to defeat segregation, discrimination, and national oppression. There is no such thing as a 'white folks' neighborhood' except to racists *and to those submitting to racism*."[3]

Mama herself—about whose "acceptance" of her "place" in the society there is not a word in the play, and who, in quest of her family's survival over the soul- and body-crushing conditions of the ghetto, is prepared to defy housing-pattern taboos, threats, bombs, and God knows what else—became the safely "conservative" matriarch, upholder of the social order and proof that if one only perseveres with faith, everything will come out right in the end and the-system-ain't-so-bad-after-all. (All this, presumably, because, true to character, she speaks and thinks in the *language* of her generation, shares their dream of a better life and, like millions of her counterparts, takes her Christianity to heart.) At the same time, necessarily, Big Walter Younger—the husband who reared this family with her and whose unseen presence and influence can be heard in every scene—vanished from analysis.

And perhaps most ironical of all to the playwright, who had herself as a child been almost killed in such a real-life story,[4] the climax of the