A Raisin In The Sun: Plot And Litigation

A Raisin in the Sun is a play by Lorraine Hansberry that debuted on Broadway in 1959. The title comes from the poem 'Harlem' by Langston Hughes. The story tells of a black family's experiences in south Chicago, as they attempt to improve their financial circumstances with an insurance payout following the death of the father. The New York Drama Critics' Circle named it the best play of 1959.

Plot

Walter and Ruth Younger, their son Travis, along with Walter's mother Lena and Walter's sister Beneatha, live in poverty in a dilapidated two-bedroom apartment on Chicago's south side. Walter is barely making a living as a limousine driver. Though Ruth is content with their lot, Walter is not and desperately wishes to become wealthy. His plan is to invest in a liquor store in partnership with Willy and Bobo, his street-smart acquaintances.

At the beginning of the play, Walter and Beneatha's father has recently died, and Mama is waiting for a life insurance check for $10,000. Walter has a sense of entitlement to the money, but Mama has religious objections to alcohol and Beneatha has to remind him it is Mama's call how to spend it. Eventually, Mama puts some of the money down on a new house, choosing an all-white neighborhood over a black one for the practical reason that it happens to be much cheaper. Later she relents and gives the rest of the money to Walter to invest with the provision that he reserve $3,000 for Beneatha's education. Walter gives all of the money to Willy, who absconds with it, depriving Walter and Beneatha of their dreams, though not the Youngers of their new home. Meanwhile, Karl Lindner, a white representative of the neighborhood they plan to move to, makes a generous offer to buy them out. He wishes to avoid neighborhood tensions over the interracial population, which to the three women's horror Walter prepares to accept as a solution to their financial setback. Lena says that while money was something they try to work for, they should never take it if it was a person's way of telling them they weren't fit to walk the same earth as they.

Meanwhile, Beneatha's character and direction in life are being defined for us by two different men: Beneatha's wealthy and educated boyfriend George Murchison, and Joseph Asagai. Neither man is actively involved in the Youngers' financial ups and downs. George represents the 'fully assimilated black man' who denies his African heritage with a 'smarter than thou' attitude, which Beneatha finds disgusting, while dismissively mocking Walter's lack of money and education. Joseph patiently teaches Beneatha about her African heritage; he gives her thoughtfully useful gifts from Africa while pointing out she is unwittingly assimilating herself into white ways. She straightens her hair, for example, which he characterizes as 'mutilation.'

When Beneatha becomes distraught at the loss of the money, she is upbraided by Joseph for her materialism. She eventually accepts his point of view that things will get better with a lot of effort, along with his proposal of marriage and his invitation to move with him to Nigeria to practice medicine.

Walter is oblivious to the stark contrast between George and Joseph: his pursuit of wealth can

be attained only by liberating himself from Joseph's culture, to which he attributes his poverty, and by rising to George's level, wherein he sees his salvation. Walter redeems himself and black pride at the end by changing his mind and not accepting the buyout offer, stating that the family is proud of who they are and will try to be good neighbors. The play closes with the family leaving for their new home but uncertain future.

The character Mrs. Johnson and a few scenes were cut from the Broadway performance and in reproductions due to time constraints. Mrs. Johnson is the Younger family's nosy and loud neighbor. She cannot understand how the family can consider moving to a white neighborhood and jokes that she will probably read in the newspaper in a month that they have been killed in a bombing. Her lines are employed as comic relief, but Hansberry also uses this scene to mock those who are too scared to stand up for their rights. In the introduction by Robert B. Nemiroff, he writes that the scene is included in print because it draws attention away from a seemingly happy ending to a more violent reality inspired by Hansberry's own experiences.

Litigation

Experiences in this play echo a lawsuit, to which the playwright Lorraine Hansberry's family was a party when they fought to have their day in court because a previous class action about racially motivated restrictive covenants had been similar to their situation. This case was heard prior to the passage of the Fair Housing Act, which prohibited discrimination in housing and created the Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity. The Hansberry family won their right to be heard as a matter of due process of law in relation to the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. The Supreme Court held that the Hansberry defendants were not bound by the Burke decision because the class of defendants in the respective cases had conflicting goals, and thus could not be considered to be the same class.

The plaintiff in the first action in 1934 was Olive Ida Burke, who brought the suit on behalf of a property owners' association to enforce racial restrictions. Her husband, James Burke, later sold a house to Carl Hansberry when he changed his mind about the validity of the covenant. Mr. Burke's decision may have been motivated by the changing demographics of the neighborhood, but it was also influenced by the Depression. The demand for houses was so low among white buyers that Mr. Hansberry may have been the only prospective purchaser available.

Lorraine reflects upon the litigation in her book To Be Young, Gifted, and Black:

'Twenty-five years ago, spent a small personal fortune, his considerable talents, and many years of his life fighting, in association with NAACP attorneys, Chicago’s ‘restrictive covenants’ in one of this nation's ugliest ghettos. That fight also required our family to occupy disputed property in a hellishly hostile ‘white neighborhood’ in which literally howling mobs surrounded our house. ... My memories of this ‘correct’ way of fighting white supremacy in America include being spat at, cursed and pummeled in the daily trek to and from school. And I also remember my desperate and courageous mother, patrolling our household all night with a loaded German Luger, doggedly guarding her four children, while my father fought the respectable part of the battle in the Washington court.'

The Hansberry house, a red-brick three-flat at 6140 S. Rhodes in Washington Park that they bought in 1937, was given landmark status by the Chicago City Council's Committee on

Historical Landmarks Preservation in 2010.

Production and reception

With a cast in which all but one character is black, A Raisin in the Sun was considered a risky investment, and it took over a year for producer Philip Rose to raise enough money to launch it. There was disagreement with how it should be played, with focus on the mother or focus on the son. When the play hit New York, Poitier played it with the focus on the son and found not only his calling but also an audience enthralled.

After touring to positive reviews, the play premiered on Broadway at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959. It transferred to the Belasco Theatre on October 19, 1959, and closed on June 25, 1960, after 530 total performances.