

ASBURY & PARK PRESS

Power of family fuels 'Raisin' revival

TOM CHESEK, CORRESPONDENT



(Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

When she sat down to write "A Raisin in the Sun," the late Lorraine Hansberry was inspired to answer the question posed by Langston Hughes — what happens to a dream deferred? — in his classic poem "Harlem."

While it raises its own additional topics of discussion along the way, the 1959 drama about one family's big dreams, hard choices and enduring bonds has always been squarely in the corner of the dreamers.

At a point when the whole notion of an American dream seems out of reach for so many, the play is back onstage, as the inaugural offering of a new season at Red Bank's Two River Theater.

Hansberry (who died at the age of 34 in 1965) drew from her own experience as a member of an educated middle-class black family who found their efforts to relocate in a traditionally all-white neighborhood derailed by obstructionist "covenants" (and, ultimately, the subject of a landmark legal decision).

The author whose writings were later adapted for the stage as "To Be Young, Gifted and Black" also had much to say here about African heritage, black female identity, and the roles that black men and women were traditionally relegated to as the Civil Rights era unfolded.



Brenda Pressley and Brandon J. Dirden in another scene from "A Raisin in the Sun."
(Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

It's a rich vein of material that's kept "Raisin" frequently revived; converted into a curiously seldom-seen musical, and taught to several generations of school-age kids. And, as Two River reminds us, it remains a living, breathing thing that has much to share in its relatively quiet way. As opposed to the playwright's background, the Younger family of "A Raisin in the Sun" is very much a working class unit, headed by Walter Lee Younger and his wife Ruth (real life married co-stars Brandon J. Dirden and Crystal A. Dickinson).

They are based in the Chicago apartment of Walter's recently widowed mother Lena (Brenda Pressley). Also sharing tight quarters in the crumbling flat are Walter's med-student sister Beneatha (Jasmine Batchelor) and the couple's pre-teen son Travis (10-year-old pro Owen Tabaka).



Left to right: 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." (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Looming large is the memory of the deceased "Big Walter," a dead-before-his-time working stiff whose life insurance payout represents several possible scenarios of self-improvement, business ownership, and escape from the "acute ghetto-itis" of a suffocating South Side existence.

As the rich man's chauffeur and nominal head of household Walter Lee, Dirden continues his happy and productive partnership with Two River Theater Company; one that saw him make his directorial debut (with Dickinson and brother Jason Dirden in the cast) in a 2015 production of Wilson's "Seven Guitars."



Crystal A. Dickinson (Ruth Younger) and Brandon J. Dirden (Walter Lee Younger) in "A Raisin in the Sun" at Two River Theater. *(Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)*

The Tony-nominated actor has invested many of his characterizations with an engaging swagger — even bringing some of that swaggering stuff to his Martin Luther King Jr. in Broadway's "All the Way" — and he paints the senior Younger man as one who is far more driven by his dreams than the more solemnly mournful portrayals seen in other productions. Even as strong drink, weak choices and a devastated plan turn that swagger into stagger, this Walter is an embracer of life; a "common man" who ultimately finds uncommon courage in the depths of his deepest shame. Score another one for the TRTC regular, now in his fifth starring turn on the Red Bank stage.

That said, the Younger household is one in which the women keep a firm grip on both the machinery of dreams and the day-to-day mechanics of survival — and each of the play's featured actresses makes a big contribution to the success of this production.



Crystal A. Dickinson (Ruth Younger), Brenda Pressley (Lena Younger) and Owen Tabaka (Travis Younger) in "A Raisin in the Sun." (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

Pressley, a familiar presence from Two River's "Trouble In Mind" and "In This House," delineates a matriarch who can match her wayward Walter dream for dream, and for whom a precarious potted plant can become a more precious heirloom than "good china" or a family photo.

As Ruth, Dickinson commandeers the spotlight for a part that's too often been all about the sadness and the struggle — an odd-woman-out in this house of Youngers, for sure, but also a repository of hope and joy and an occasionally allowed dream all her own.

It should be noted that Hansberry seasoned her issues-infused domestic drama with generous amounts of levity and emotional highs — elements not always brought to the fore. In his debut project at Two River, award winning off-Broadway director Carl Cofield finds the music, the dance, the celebration, and the outright laughs that are all part of this one family's journey to the crossroads, and beyond into uncharted territory.



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 scene from "A Raisin in the Sun." (Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

The subplot storyline of Beneatha — her ambitions, her issues of identity, and the conflicting forces represented by her two gentleman callers — has always been something of a parallel play in itself, and Batchelor lights up the stage with her interpretation of a brilliant and dynamic young woman who, more than anyone else, embodies the future for this family.

Supporting players Charlie Hudson III (as Afro-centric exchange student Asagai) and York Walker (as the "assimilated" George) go a good way toward humanizing some of the dryer and preachier passages of Hansberry's script — and the family theme is enhanced by the presence of Brandon's father Willie Dirden as Bobo, the prospective business partner turned bearer of unwelcome news.



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."
(Photo: COURTESY OF T. CHARLES ERICKSON)

As Mr. Lindner, Broadway veteran Nat DeWolf gives disarmingly polite voice to the ever-swirling currents of bigotry; a rider that arrives with business card and briefcase, rather than white robes and flaming torch.

In the sure hands of Two River's capable team, "A Raisin in the Sun" rescues a modern milestone from the classroom curriculum — allowing us to appreciate its lasting gifts, and its timeless qualities, with fresh eyes.

A RAISIN IN THE SUN

WHEN: Through Oct. 8

WHERE: Two River Theater, 21 Bridge Ave., Red Bank

TICKETS: \$20 to \$70

INFO: 732-345-1400 or www.tworivertheater.org