A Call to Action in *Raisin in the Sun*

By Patricia Cotter

Since Lorraine Hansberry wrote the play and the un-filmed screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun* in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement, I believe that she would have been profoundly influenced by what was happening around her, not satisfied with a mere recounting of oppression and deferred dreams, but rather coding the text with a plan to action for change. This plan of action is not visible in the movie, but it stands out in the screenplay in Asagai’s conversation with Beneatha after Walter has been robbed by Willy of all the leftover insurance money his mother entrusted to him. The movie version omits much of the dialogue in favor of the romance of the scene, which is unfortunate because the scene furnishes a valuable meaning to the end of the play.

Critic J. Charles Washington states that “the primary meaning of the play [is] the tragedy of Walter’s reach for the American Dream” (Washington 112). I disagree. The text is rich with layers that can be analyzed, but, in my opinion, it is supported by an underlying structure on top of which clings a setting of surface phenomena purposefully crafted to approach the plight of African Americans from every conceivable angle in order for Hansberry to convince black viewers that she thoroughly understood their plight and was credible enough to push them into action, since Hansberry was raised “in one of Chicago’s wealthiest and most prominent black families, an upbringing that led her critics to wonder whether in fact she could be trusted to speak the truth of black poor and working class lives” (Kodat 155). The structure which gives *A Raisin in the Sun* its meaning is the universal truth that in order to affect change, men must act. Hansberry asserted “that one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific. Universality, I think emerges from the truthful identity of what is” (qtd. Washington 110). So Hansberry, in order to arrive at the universal, focused on the specifics and the surface phenomena, in her screenplay by taking the reader out of the apartment and into the city to show us what it is like to work for white employers, whites in control of economic power, and to view the differences of neighborhoods, of opportunities and even of prices where African Americans were sold inferior produce at a greater price than what was offered outside the areas populated by blacks. She delved into the areas involving the search for identity, assimilation, belief in the American Dream, the suspended black woman, patriarchy, racism and so on.

Another reason I believe that the call to action in order to achieve change was the primary theme of *A Raisin in the Sun* is that an artist’s work is inevitably influenced by his or her life experiences. Lorraine Hansberry was raised by a man who showed by example that it was possible to stand up against what was wrong and affect change. Her father attempted to move his family into a white neighborhood, and they were “ordered to leave the home by a local court, which upheld the neighborhood’s racially restrictive covenant” (Kodat 156). Carl Hansberry would not accept this verdict, presenting his case until it was finally heard by the Supreme Court who, in 1940, ruled
against the constitutionality of racially restrictive housing covenants (Kodat 156).

Since the lines which emphasize my thesis were deleted from the film version of *A Raisin in the Sun*, I will have to resort to a step-by-step review of the screenplay’s scene between Beneatha and Asagai. The movie shows Walter disappearing into the bedroom after his discovery of Willy’s betrayal, and the viewer never sees Walter’s reactions to their conversation. However in the screenplay, Hansberry wrote in three scenes where Walter is seen listening. By the third scene, Walter has left his bed and “his head is pressed against the door as he listens” (Hansberry 186). This signifies to me that the scene has an impact on the meaning and resolution of the play, because Hansberry didn’t have to place Walter intently listening at the door. She could have left him in bed or ignored him as the movie did.

The scene begins with the arrival of Asagai who has come to help with the packing. Asagai notices that something is amiss and is determined to unearth the matter. Beneatha challenges him with, “You with the dreams of the future think you will patch up all Africa. You are going to cure the great sore of colonialism with independence” to which he replies with an emphatic, “Yes!” (Hansberry 184). She then asks him what will happen when the new government takes over and turns out to be as corrupt as the old. Asagai’s answer is – “That will be the problem of another time. First we must get there” (Hansberry 184). Beneatha is looking for an end to the struggle, but Asagai sees struggle and living as synonymous. To Beneatha, living is circular, traveling over the same paths with a different cast of characters without affecting progress. However, Asagai believes that life is linear “and because we cannot see the end, we also cannot see how it changes. And it is very odd that those who see the changes are called ‘idealists,’ and those who cannot, or refuse to, think they are the ‘realists’ …” (Hansberry 185). Next, Asagai tells Beneatha that the Younger family’s hopes and dreams depend on the insurance money from their father but that the money could have just as easily not been available, so that it was not a reliable foundation to build upon. Instead, Asagai spells out what I believe is the underlying structure to the screenplay when he praises Lena for her “greatness” and says, “for all of her ignorance, for all of her groping … she moves, she acts, she changes things. She is the substance of the human race. You—in your present state—you are but another burden for her. Something to carry along, to bolster …” (Hansberry 187). He says that Beneatha’s attitude is to give up the struggle, because it is meaningless. To which she retorts that Asagai doesn’t have an answer, and he replies, “I live the answer” (Hansberry 187). Asagai is a doer. He and others like him will “return home [to] work and teach, and things will happen; the sudden dramatic events which make history leap into the future. Because we make it so” (Hansberry 188). His challenge to Beneatha is—“Stop moaning and groaning and tell me what you plan to do” (Hansberry 88).

Lena and her husband were people of action and dignity. They didn’t sit around waiting for the world to change to accommodate them. Lena explains her husband to Walter Lee—“You got hurt and pain in you? Well, I used to know a man who knew how to live with his pain and make his hurt work for him. Your daddy died with dignity; there wasn’t no bum in him. And he known some hurts in this life you ain’t never even heard of!” (Hansberry 140). Big Walter provided for his family the only way he knew how, working himself to death and buying into an insurance policy to
give them something after his death. He would say, “Seem like God didn’t seem fit to give the black man nothin’ but dreams – but he did give us children to make them dreams seem worthwhile” (Hansberry 70).

Asagai was correct in lauding Lena, because she saw a problem and acted immediately on it. Even in the past, Lena realized that she must move North to escape southern racism, and “she was a fighter who took the step … in order to make a meaningful change in her life … she is still a fighter, and she proves it by buying the house to bring about the change she now feels is needed for her family’s welfare” (Washington 113). As she explained to Walter, “I just seen my family falling apart today in front of my eyes. We couldn’t have gone on like we was today. We was going backwards ‘stead of forwards – talkin’ ‘bout killing babies and wishin’ each other was dead” (Hansberry 127).

When I finished watching the movie version of *A Raisin in the Sun*, I remember questioning the wisdom of Walter Lee’s decision to move the family into a neighborhood where they were not wanted. After reading the screenplay, I realize that his decision to move was the only one he could have made if he ever wanted to realize his dreams. Some might say that the move prevented him from realizing his dreams, because his family would be financially strapped. However, I believe a bigger issue was at stake. I believe Hansberry was telling her black audience that the time to stand up with dignity for their rights and to lay claim on what was theirs had come. Lena and alter Lee would act in a small way and so could her audience. The collective assertion of civil rights in small acts across the nation could bring about major change, and, as we know from history, it did.

**Works Cited**

