

figures of earth
a column by Bill Kostura

In 1959 the first play by Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun*, opened on Broadway. It was the first Broadway play by a black woman, it was a hit, and, moreover, it won the New York Drama Circle Critics Award as the best play of the season.

A Raisin in the Sun is also very good, achieving such a variety of objectives as rarely attempted in most plays. It is the story of the Youngers, a black, Southside Chicago family of the 1950's consisting of the matriarchal Mama, her grown children Walter and Beneatha, Walter's wife Ruth, and their son Travis. They are poor, live in a rat-hole apartment, and are about to receive a \$10,000 life insurance payment from the death of Mama's husband. Walter, disgusted with the struggling existence they have led, wants to use the sum to open an ill-planned liquor store. Mama, however, plans to finance Beneatha's medical education with it.

There is more than the chronicling of the struggles of one black family. Without generalizing beyond the very real details of a very real family, Hansberry shows us the dreams of people who are poor, the pride of an idealistic college girl caught up in the idea of an African heritage, and the deeper pride of an old black woman whose family for generations has maintained an uncompromised dignity in the face of humiliations.

And rather than show us people who have simple loves or two-dimensional problems, Hansberry gives us a married couple who, after eleven years, are still discovering the difficulties of knowing what each other want and need; people who are everyday foolish but have the wisdom that comes of living; people who, through all the problems and confusions of life, still manage to feel with intensity.

Toward the end of the play Walter blows the bulk of the ten thousand on his shadow dream. Beneatha reviles him, but Mama

warns: "You feeling like you better than he is today? ... You done wrote his epitaph too, like the rest of the world? ... When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right, child, measure him right. Make sure you done taken into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got to wherever he is."

A Raisin in the Sun tells of dreams shattered and realized, and of living through the shattered parts with a dignity that does not mean meek acceptance, or senseless outrage, but a strong and uncompromising self-will. In this last analysis then, it is a story of blacks in particular.

But one other of Hansberry's plays appeared in her lifetime, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*. It takes place in Brustein's Greenwich Village apartment in the "present" (1964) where we find the variety of characters you might expect in the Village of that time. It is about commitment. Brustein had once belonged to every cause in sight, to the point that he finally saw every shred of pointlessness and absurdity in them.

When he takes over a local newspaper, a friend running as a reform candidate asks his endorsement, but Brustein makes his disinterest clear. Resistance, though, breaks down, the old fires are lit, and we see, finally, a large banner hanging in his window: "CLEAN UP COMMUNITY POLITICS—Wipe Out Bossism—VOTE REFORM."

Sidney has returned to the cause, but the world is real: Sidney's candidate sells out after winning the election. It's a blow, but no cause for disillusionment. It's as if Sidney were involved for the first time for good reasons: "I care, Wally, I care about it all. It takes too much energy not to care. Yesterday I counted twenty-six grey hairs on the top of my head—all from trying not to care... The why of why we are here is an intrigue for adolescents; the how is what

must command the living. Which is why I have lately become—an insurgent again!"

Such excerpts sound idealistic (O.K., they are) but the impact of Hansberry's plays is a result of the detailed realism with which she writes. And for her, realism involves "not only what is, but what is possible... so that you get a much larger potential of what men can do." All (well, save one) of the characters in *Brustein's Window* come amazingly alive to us, and it's because we see not just what they, and how they live, but what they want, and hope to achieve. The most close-minded, conservative, busybodyish and uninteresting person in *Brustein* is, in one short page of dialog, shown to be as compassionate, curious, vitally interesting and aware as anyone in the story. This is shown without any feeling of dichotomy or contradiction. Hansberry feels, and seems to prove, that there are no simple people. One person seems to be quite as worthy of writing about as anyone else, if only the writer has the necessary insight.

The play, as I said, is about commitment, and indeed, the main focus may be to wide-scale improvements—political causes. The content is so varied, the people lovable, that any number of "causes" deserving of the reader's energy may suggest themselves.

The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window closed on Broadway in 1965 on the day of Lorraine Hansberry's death, of cancer, at age 34. The feeling of loss at this knowledge is made more immediate and personal by her posthumous book, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, an autobiographical collection of excerpts and miscellaneous writings.

A collection is available of her last three plays, *Les Blancs*, and *The Movement*, a photographic account of conditions in the South which she wrote the text for.

No beer in Venus; citizens keep dry

Associated Press
VENUS, Tex. — There might be water on Mars, but there is no beer in Venus.

There hasn't been a beer sold legally in this town in its 83-year history. Sales of other alcoholic beverages also are illegal.

And all but 10 of the registered voters in this 414-member community 35 miles south of Dallas voted recently to keep it that way.

The dries had it 129 to 86 in what residents say was the town's biggest voter turnout—bigger than any city council or school board election.

Election judge D. F. Burgess said of the turnout, "The elderly and the

crippled turned out to vote and maybe some of the wets didn't care enough to vote."

Conti Russell, 79, a lifelong Venus resident who was on hand outside city hall to boost support for the dry side, told why he was against the idea of beer sales: "There's no harm in a man drinking a can of beer if he takes it home. But you know one thing leads to another. A man will go from beer to some hard stuff and later will end up on dope."

Dry proponents, who formed an organization called Citizens Against Beer, warned local residents that Venus would become the only wet spot in Johnson County. They said

everybody in the county would flock to Venus for beer, and they claimed police would have to be hired because the town would no longer be safe for children.

But City Councilman James Flatt, who supported the sale of beer, saw it as a way to raise tax money for a new park and road repairs.

"People here just don't realize how this defeat will hurt the town financially," Flatt bemoaned.

"I don't think we will try to come back soon with another election. If it had been 10 votes or so we would have come back in 90 days."

Flatt might be sad, but he won't be able to go home and cry in his beer.

'Dog Day Afternoon' City, society movie's subject

By SHEPHERD GRINNAN

"Dog Day Afternoon" is the true story of the robbery of a Chase Manhattan Bank branch in New York City on August 22, 1972, the same day on which the Republican National Convention began.

The movie stars Al Pacino as Sonny Wortzowicz, and John Cazale as his partner Salvatore Naturale. Both actors previously worked together in "The Godfather." Another of Pacino's roles was the leading character in "Serpico" (1973), directed by Sidney Lumet, who is also the director of "Dog Day Afternoon."

Some of Lumet's other movies include "Twelve Angry Men" (1957), an excellent story about a hung jury; "The Pawnbroker" (1963); "Fail Safe" (1964); and "Murder on the Orient Express" (1974).

As the screen opens, an energetic Elton John song plays and the camera catches scenes of life in New York City. Ships float in the bay and mothers and their children leave an afternoon movie.

Cars drive by and the camera focuses on

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a parked car in a busy downtown street. In the car are three people: Sonny (Al Pacino), Sal (John Cazale), and Bobby (Gary Springer).

The three enter the bank just as it is closing. Sal goes over to the manager and Sonny pretends to make a deposit. They surprise the tellers and announce the bank robbery.

The emphasis at this point is on comedy. A teller's husband calls asking when the robbery will be over. Sonny can't leave the bank with the tellers in the safe because they have to go to the bathroom. When Sonny asks Sal what country he wants to go to he answers Wyoming. Sonny gets a surprise phone call and discovers the bank is surrounded by the police (not so funny).

Director Lumet builds his plot from the insensibility of New York City to specific instances of comedy, and finally to ultimate



Star Al Pacino and Penny Allen, as novice bank robber and nervous teller, enact the start of the strangest heist ever in "Dog Day Afternoon."

tragedy. He carries the audience on an emotional landslide, gradually gathering momentum until the pressure is unbearable.

Sonny begins negotiating with the outside and finds not only police helicopters, news media, and curious onlookers, but also the crowd's sympathy. He gains the crowd's support by telling the policemen to put up their hands and yell "Attica! Attica!"

Sonny negotiates with Detective Sergeant Moretti, a "typical New York City cop" who later develops into a sympathetic man, concerned for both the hostages and the robbers. Sonny tells him that he is married and has two kids. He finds out that Sonny robbing to secure money for his wife's sex change operation.

Sonny and Sal demand a plane to take them to Algeria (Bobby got "bad vibes" left), and at this point the real trouble begins. Moretti is replaced in the negotiations by an FBI agent. Cool and professional, he does his job. The hostages are driven by an FBI agent in a limousine to Kennedy Airport. One of the robbers is killed.

"A Dog Day Afternoon" is the story of many things. It is the story about New York City and a robbery that took place there; it is also the story about the conflict between man and society; a man is seen as he is, and society is seen as it is. The movie is a man's dilemma.

If you are interested in the story of what really happened in the robbery, the front page of the *New York Times* for August 23-24, 1972, describes the robbery. It can be found on the third floor of the library in the microtext section.



John Cazale stars with Al Pacino in "Dog Day Afternoon."



"Two Fingersi