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A Raisin in the Sun

by Lorraine Hansberry

Directed by Lou Bellamy
Co-produced with
The Cleveland Play House and Arizona Theatre Company
Presented by RBC Wealth Management

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Penumbra Theatre Company Study Guide
Spotlight Interview: The Director

SPOTLIGHT INTERVIEW: THE DIRECTOR

by Stephanie Lein Walseth: August Wilson Fellow
with *A Raisin in the Sun* director Lou Bellamy
February 13th, 2009 at Penumbra Theatre in St. Paul, Minnesota
Transcribed by Annie Bruss

LEIN WALSETH: Given that this production of *A Raisin in the Sun* is being presented as a commemoration and celebration of the 50th anniversary of the play's Broadway debut, what do you think it means to do this play *now*? How does it resonate with a contemporary audience? How do you think the world has or has not changed in the past 50 years, especially now that we have an African American president who did community-organizing work in the very neighborhood that Hansberry depicts in this play?

BELLAMY: I wish I could say that I had planned it! In American theater before *A Raisin in the Sun*, there was only one black play which both reached larger audiences *and* depicted a complicated portrayal of an African American family – Theodore Ward's *Big White Fog*, written in 1937. Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin*, was for a new generation some forty years later, white America's first peek into the movements, the nuance, and the culture of a black family. Although this black family [in *Raisin*] is rather scrubbed up to be presented to the nation, it is still intact with all of the cultural nuances that inform the way the family exists. It is, one might argue, stereotypical in its matriarchal construction. Still, the manner in which the family share—for example—child rearing is so, so black. The little boy receives some corporal punishment for acting badly. Those kinds of things let you know that this is a black family.

Now, when I say it was the first time most of America peeked into that black family life, this was during the beginnings of the Civil Rights Movement. So when black people were presented to the public it was largely in that context – either in the sort of menial positions that they were working, or in a confrontational mode over these Civil Rights issues that were coming to the fore. So, this play was unique in that it gave this complicated and sympathetic view of a family, a family that dreams for the same sort of fulfillment that most Americans do.

Compare that situation 50 years ago to this particular time when we are again peeking into the inner workings of a black family with Obama being President. We're watching the way they live, we're watching the clothes they choose, we're watching the way they interact with their family, what sort of pets they buy, what sort of dolls they have. So again, 50 years later a black family and its interaction is at the center of America's attention. The Obama family is emblematic of the challenge to the status quo, in the same way that the Youngers were challenging the status quo. So there are, I think, lots of parallels.

Certainly inflation has taken us to a place where ten thousand dollars doesn't sound like that much money, although it is to you and I. [*laughter*] Still, it is the tension point, the crucible in which this family is tested. And the economy is forcing us again to make those kinds of choices about money and well being – economic well-being versus perhaps a kind of spiritual renewal and understanding of who we are. So, it's an interesting comparison. And of course *I knew* all of that was going to happen and chose the play for that reason. No! [*laughter*] But really, it speaks to the way good art will find a way to be relevant and meaningful and vibrant for any generation.

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LEIN WALSETH: Speaking of vibrancy and meaningfulness, how do you think that our current situation as a nation has changed what's possible for African Americans pursuing this idea of the American dream and what impediments do you think still remain?

BELLAMY: Well, I think the impediments have not been removed. To use a sports analogy, we, in America, have at various times placed our hopes and our dreams inside of, on top of, the black body. We did it with heavyweight boxing when Joe Louis was sent out to fight Max Schmeling and in a very real way represent the United States against the German empire. We did it again with Jesse Owens. We do it to some degree with Serena and Venus [Williams]. And we've done it again with Barack Obama. This president is *phenomenally* popular all over the world because he again represents a hopeful America. In every one of the those cases that I mentioned, however, the life and condition of the rest of the people was not significantly changed when that one individual was singled out and became the gladiator that went out to fight for the country, to protect it, and to represent its nationalism. So, one hopes that in this case, with the journey that Barack Obama made to the White House, that he forged a path, or at least taught us where the stones are to step on to improve ourselves as well. But I don't hold out a lot of hope for that. I may be pessimistic but I'm old enough to have seen this sort of thing happen before. Certainly the same sort of institutional racism that makes for a sort of understanding between the 'good 'ol boys' will change because he's in the room. But it remains to be seen how far that trickles down, and I hate to use that Reagan analogy, but trickles down to the rest of us.

LEIN WALSETH: I hear you speaking to the social and material realities of both historical and contemporary moments, and I think it is so critical to look at the continuity between the two. It's certainly easy, to some degree, for us to see a play like *Raisin* and think that social problems like poverty and racism are relegated to the past in a "that was the 50s, we're doing so much better now" kind of way. But I think you needn't look very far to find that these are persistent issues here in the Twin Cities in 2009, and that while legal segregation may no longer be in place, social attitudes and issues of class still keep people in separate neighbors. Some of my good friends, a white couple, were looking for a house in North Minneapolis where one of them works and they had to go through three realtors before they could find someone who would sell them…

BELLAMY: Before they would even show it to them, yes-yes!

LEIN WALSETH: …yes, thinking of course they wouldn't want to live in this predominantly black…

BELLAMY: I know, I know…

LEIN WALSETH: …and poor neighborhood. So, I wonder how you think, or hope, that your audiences might connect what they're seeing in this play with the current realities of the living, breathing city around them?

BELLAMY: I think arts function to make us *remember*, and this play *will* make us remember. I don't have to be *that* specific as an artist. I think what we have to do is present the human condition, present the possibilities, present the interactions and then once all of that's aroused in an individual, I have the faith, the confidence that it will live on and be applied in all kinds of ways. If we're too specific and attempt to proscribe for them how to apply it: "this is for the house in North Minneapolis on Plymouth between and such and such and such and such," then we limit the scope and reach of the play. But, if we talk about the human condition, about finding ourselves in the Younger family, about understanding that we *all* have dreams, then I've

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got to believe that it engenders respect for one another and changes us as a society. I would rather not be as specific as you're suggesting, I'd rather be more, I guess spiritual in my hope for a reaction. Because certainly the intellectual dimension is taken care of by Lorraine Hansberry, those words are there. Our job, while those words are being spoken and the audience is processing them in an intellectual way, is to sneak up and put the emotional wallop on it so it can never be forgotten, so those two things are always paired for the audience, *forever*. That's good art. [*laughter*] You know?

LEIN WALSETH: Yeah! Speaking of good art, let's talk about Penumbra's mission of 'Art for Social Change' in relation to Lorraine Hansberry's motivations for artistic creation. You've just articulated some of the tenants of how you understand change working in and through this piece, and I was struck when doing research on Lorraine Hansberry about her political activism. There's a lot about her that I don't think general audiences might know – the fact that she was a lesbian and a feminist, that she wrote for Paul Robeson's journal *Freedom* and worked with SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and that she spoke out against the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

BELLAMY: And yet was married to a white Jewish man. She's complicated isn't she? Her best friend was James Baldwin. To complicate it even more, when she talked about the play she said, "It isn't a black play. It isn't a Negro play." She *said* that. She said, "It is a play about *people* who *happen* to be Negro." Yet in her writing, it's so interesting, in her writing she *writes* a black play, and perhaps she could do nothing else. It's got that universal sort of feel to it, but it *is* specific to the black community. Now some will argue that this community is euphemistically treated. There are no dope dealers, there's relatively small crime, and most of the time the rat scene is cut from the play. So you get a sanitized version of these people in terms of both race and class. People like Harold Cruse in *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* says, "My God, who *wouldn't* want to live next to the Youngers? They're perfect!" [*laughter*] And to some degree that's true. Yet the people will speak for themselves. Hansberry's treatment of Asagai, and her understanding of colonialism and post-colonialism is still instructive and absolutely wonderful. So, in spite of herself and her choice of doing a certain thing with the play, it's interesting that she can't slip the bonds of her culture and her upbringing. They still inform and seep through and speak to us. Whether or not she meant to, it's still *in* there.

LEIN WALSETH: Interesting. So, what do you make of that phrase, "It's not a black play. It's not a Negro play. It's just a play that *happens* to be about black people."?

BELLAMY: I think that it speaks to an integrationist sort of perspective. It's *okay* to be a black play. If it is truly, deeply, unintentionally perhaps, a black play, and speaks to an honesty and truth about that experience, it will be a universal play. I'm not white, but I don't think white people sit down and say, "I'm going to write a white play." You know? I think they write a play that reflects their understanding, their perception of the world through the cultural membrane within which they find themselves.

Now, it turns out that when one does that, the words one uses, the descriptions, and the perceptions one chooses place him or her in a particular polemic posture. To set out to be universal and to believe that that universal is Eurocentric, to me, starts out from a position of weakness. And I say that speaking English, right? [*laughter*] So, I'm already beat [*laughter*], but at least I understand that. I think that Chekov is *Russian*, you know, he's *Russian*. Ibsen, all these people are *very, very specific* in all of their writings and when one just sheds who one is and says, "This isn't what I'm going to do, this isn't who I am," I think that's a position of weakness. And it's also old-fashioned in that it seeks to *erase* color, to *erase* cultural difference, and I hope that we've evolved to a place now where we want to *recognize* cultural difference and find humanity

inside of that. We don't want to *homogenize* everyone. Look at what we've done in that way – I mean, we take away language, we take away culture, we cut people's hair, we make them – you know we do these things to them in an attempt to *not see* those differences. And what we have to do now, in my humble perception, is to teach people to *see* those differences again and find humanity and worth inside of them. That's the challenge.

And so, to give that up from the start is like tying one arm behind your back and getting into the ring with a heavyweight boxer. I mean it cripples you, it hobbles you, it makes you *vulnerable* to everything out there that's coming at you because you can't use your entire arsenal of cultural specificity.

LEIN WALSETH: I wonder if part of what Hansberry was getting at with her statement has to do with her specific moment in the history of African American theatrical literature?

BELLAMY: Of course it does.

LEIN WALSETH: And, as you teach in your classes, though Hansberry and August Wilson are some the most known and often produced playwrights, they are certainly not the *only* black playwrights. You mentioned Theodore Ward and *Big White Fog*, for instance, and I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how you understand this play as fitting into a broader framework of plays by African American authors, which may speak to that idea of what a Negro play is or was during the 1950s and 1960s?

BELLAMY: Most of the time the black playwright is charged with whether or not they want to take on the mantle of correcting the common thinking. If they show complicated African Americans inside of the society they're being rather revolutionary because most of the depictions of African Americans have been pretty simple and stereotypical. The challenge is to present a reality on the stage that has its own rules of engagement, its own cultural nuance, its own language or way of talking, its own meaning, and so forth that cannot be apart from the influence of the society. I mean, we can't *not* be where we are. We're constantly influenced by where we are, by essays that are written, newspaper articles, all sorts of popular entertainment, wars. All of these sorts of things affect our thinking and so a piece will be affected by those things. It is the human condition presented with those realities, and to truly understand the texts you have to place them within their historical realities.

Look for instance at Arthur Miller's *The Crucible*. Okay, when did he write it and what were the sorts of the things that were going on? McCarthy was going crazy. Now, Miller places the play at the time of the Salem witch trials, but he was influenced tremendously by what was going on during his own time. Lorraine Hansberry says that this is not a Negro play, yet who else has these kinds of covenants placed against them where they can't move and have to live in certain sorts of situations and neighborhoods? In what other families does everyone work in domestic positions? You know, [with the Youngers] the mother cleans houses, the wife works in the kitchen, and the husband is a chauffeur. Well, that says something about the strata that she's writing in and about.

Where I think Hansberry fits, is that she came along at a time when this story *could be* shared, when we were *interested* in this story. I know *tons* of other family stories, black family stories that were not picked up and disseminated to the same extent. So, to that degree it has to do with what the country is ready for, who will buy tickets and all those sorts of things. She did present a complicated, intact black family, although a matriarchal one, you know, that grandma is there. I think that set the stage. Once we had that good, honest, straightforward family out there, then I think black playwrights started to say, "Well, what's behind all that? Who's on the other side

of that door? We've seen this part of it and its solid and it worked and it made money and people loved it and all that. But let's see where Bobo comes from." [*laughter*]

We've got the Black Arts Movement coming right after this, where the function of art is truly prescribed and is *really linked* to a political movement just as *A Raisin in the Sun* is, whether or not Hansberry meant for it to be, *linked* to the Civil Rights Movement. These are people moving into white neighborhoods and changing things. So, as I look back on it, it seems that once this solid ground was there people could riff on it and go in some different directions, and they certainly did and have. So much so that you get a George C. Wolfe, for instance, satirizing the 'momma on the couch' play, or more specifically the 'momma on the couch' play done badly. Still, that kind of play has now reached a place where you can shoot at it rather than being afraid to criticize it, because at one time it was the only sort of black thing that was out there.

You see that in politics as well. Look at some of the people who have risen to high political places…Jesse Jackson, for instance. I mean, there are some people who would have criticized him more insightfully and soundly, as well as other black political figures and they wouldn't have gotten perhaps as far as they did were they not "the one." Or, they may have been vetted in a manner which prepared them better for the national arena. So, it's an interesting thing and I think this play might have played a similar role, provided a similar function.

LEIN WALSETH: Definitely. That speaks a lot to the politics of the piece and what Hansberry was trying to do. I'm also interested in the *form* of this piece – social realism was, at that moment, very strong…

BELLAMY: Oh yeah!

LEIN WALSETH: …and now we find ourselves in the post-modern moment where realism gets critiqued as an effective method of expression and representation. And so, I am wondering how you, as someone who I would say is a master at directing this kind of work…

BELLAMY: But look, before you go there, look at who she's *watching*. She's watching Clifford Odets. She's seeing the power of that naturalistic wave and she's riding on it. Sean O'Casey, *Juno and the Paycock*, that's what she loved and wrote after. It's the first thing that touched her, so she's riding on that.

LEIN WALSETH: Yeah, yeah! Well [*laughter*] it's great to see you get so excited because I think of you as a master of directing this kind of work and so I'm curious to know how you understand the power and the benefit of realism.

BELLAMY: Well, I think that all these –isms, surrealism, expressionism, naturalism, etc.….you know, all of them are an attempt to express this human condition in an informed manner. I've heard people say that naturalism is the result of too many subway rides [*laughter*]. You know, all of us get into this expressionistic sort of stuff and we go, "Where's the narrative? How am I supposed to apply this?" All of these forms are attempts to describe a world where all kinds of things are coming at you at once, and the feeling is that naturalism or realism can't express that, and so you look for another way to express it. But, I think that to discard any of it is an error. You don't decide to talk about your nose and cut off your hands so that you can do it.

LEIN WALSETH: [*laughter from both*] Okay…

BELLAMY: You know what I mean?

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LEIN WALSETH: Yeah.

BELLAMY: We need *all* of these things. When I direct realism, and I guess I would call it a sort of a stretched naturalism really (some want to call it "magical realism"), it isn't real. In reality, things come too fast [*snaps quickly to demonstrate*]. So, what you have to do as a director is control things, and slow them down, emphasize certain things, and slide by others. I try to make the blocking, the pace, all those sorts of things take on a poetic significance so that it makes an audience relate to stimuli in a *different* kind of way. I try to make them fill a *gap*.

Take for instance, the moment in *Raisin* when the actor playing Walter Lee has to get down on his knees and go through that monologue, "Maybe I'll get down on my black knees and I'll…" Well, when Sidney Poitier did that it was too cleaned up for me, and when Danny Glover did it he sunk so low that I couldn't go there with him. I mean, he was slobbering all over himself. This is a moment where you, as a director working in a naturalistic way, can complicate a simple gesture and make it have *way* more impact than any kind of expressionism or any other way of working.

What I worked with David Alan, the actor playing Walter Lee in our production, to do in this scene was to find a moment when he could *discover himself on his knees*. In that moment he has to *recoil* from this thought and this position, so he jumps up, he stands up quickly and he says, subtextually, "Oh, s**t! I didn't mean to go there." So, as directors and actors you can't just go with the flow of the words, you've got to make them comment in different kinds of ways that inform and complicate understandings of this specific human situation. When you can do this, it allows an audience to peer into the experience in a different kind of way. If audiences or critics don't like realism or naturalism, it's often because they're used to seeing *bad* naturalism and *bad* realism, where it's almost somnambulistic. But when it is treated as an *active* art rather than as a museum piece it *lives* and we are affected by it.

I just read a review from a guy in Phoenix and, it's so funny, he says, "I've seen one show a week for twenty years 'cause I'm a reviewer and that must mean that I've seen a thousand shows…" or something like that and he said, "I have *always* in all those years *resisted* that urge to rise stupidly as some audiences do and jump to their feet and give a standing ovation to a play. I've just never been affected to that point, until I saw *A Raisin in the Sun* and I was up with all the rest of them." Because it can *reach there*, it can *do it*. You know what I mean? It has to be controlled. If you let it slip too far it jumps into melodrama and we step away from it, or it can even become funny. But you've got to keep that discovery and that interest there. You can't let the audience get ahead of it. You have to challenge 'em, you can't *do it all* for them. You stop just short and then let them finish and sometimes jump to another place and they connect it. And then they go, "Wow [*laughs*], yeah that was deep. I liked that." You know what I mean? It's manipulative, *of course*. That's what we do. But I think it can be done well.

LEIN WALSETH: In a bit of a different direction, but still in terms of making connections, one of things that you've done in a lot of your interviews and in the classes that you teach, is to weave in stories about your own family, your own childhood growing up and its relation to the work. I wondered if you had any particular stories for this piece that you talked with the cast about or have been thinking about – perhaps ways that your family situation was similar to or connected with the Younger family's situation as Hansberry depicts it in this play?

BELLAMY: Just so many, I mean just as Lorraine Hansberry couldn't get away from who she was, I can't either. In the beginning of the piece, Ruth is sitting in the kitchen in the dark and we see the sunrise come through the kitchen window. She's drinking coffee and presumably thinking about pregnancy and whether or not she is going to let the baby go to term and all

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that. And she is dressed in a nightgown with a robe over it, and the robe is open. So, we get the feeling that we're peeking into something. We are seeing something that we shouldn't see, this robe is open, she's alone, she's considering life. And I remember my mother used to do that. She'd get up, and you'd come in sometimes in the middle of the night, and she'd just be sitting, in the dark, thinking. It's so feminine to me to see that, to see a woman thinking like that.

So, anyway that begins the play. The play really starts as the audience comes in, and they're drawn into that moment, I hope. The alarm goes off and the house lights start to dim and so the audience wakes up *with* the play. And it's really fun to watch them. They get it, that tremendous – I have to be careful or I'd cry – that immense belief in the young people that they're gonna be better. It's *so black*. And it's something that is sometimes lost because we buy all these depictions of what blackness is and it's so negative. But within this play and within the community there's this *high* placement of education and what it can do and a belief in the younger people. When I was a kid they used to call me "professor." I didn't know I was gonna be one [*laughter*] – I was a little kid! And now I *am* a professor. I don't know, maybe that did something, you know what I mean? But I was *expected*, there was *no question* that I was going to go to college. And I'm the first one to go to college in my family, the first to get advanced degrees. But that was always expected of me, and that's inside of this play. Walter Lee says of his sister, "That's my sister, she's going to be a doctor" [*laughter*]. You know it's just *expected* that the next generation is going to make it better. So, that's there, those strong women.

There's a moment that, for me, is the most beautiful moment I've *ever* seen in a play. And it's again where you can complicate the naturalistic. It's a moment during the dance that Walter and Beneatha do to Babatunde Olatunji's music. The way I described to them what I wanted them to do is that they're playing around, dancing, and the drums start, and it begins to put them *in sync* with each other. They begin to move in a kind of a way that is really the creation of another world, of another society, and there's *power* in finding that connection. And for a second there they are *one*, and all of those people (and by extension, having taken part in the ritual, us) are *together* and they're all …it just trips me out when they do it, you know? And out of that he comes up, in that one expressionistic little moment in the play, he comes up and says, "Do you hear me my black brothers?" And it's gotta come out of that sort of male-female community, and music and rhythms and it impels an individual to *be better* [*laughter*] and you really see it there. And you could just have a dance, you know? But you can *talk* about what that is while it's going on rather than just having it, you know what I mean? You can layer the meaning. And so, I think those are the opportunities to engage the material in a *live* way.

LEIN WALSETH: Last question, as I want to give you some time to eat your lunch before you go back into rehearsal. These points you bring up about moments of togetherness, moments of unity, seem to define, for you, the heart and maybe the success of this piece. When the play was first produced on Broadway its success was defined in large part by the fact that it was created by a black female playwright, directed by a black director, Lloyd Richards, featuring an all black cast…

BELLAMY: Designed by a black designer who never got into the union, incidentally….

LEIN WALSETH: All of which served to make it a monumental achievement in the late 1950s. Now this production of the play is touring to regional theaters, spaces which often afford that similar sense of "hitting the big time," if you will. But I think what you're talking about is defining the success of this piece and the brilliance of it and the ability of it to connect to people in a different way. I wonder, then, what *is* your hope for this production? What have you seen so far with the run in Cleveland and Arizona, and what do you hope its success will be here in the Twin Cities?

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BELLAMY: This play is constructed around *hope*, and it allows us to share in that hope. It is not pessimistic. Right now there seems to be such an emphasis on money and material possessions as a measuring stick for success, and this play transcends that standard. The Youngers have lost the money, but in so doing they've found something out about themselves that equips them to survive in an atmosphere that the money couldn't protect them from. They've found something better, and we all want that. Look at the way we talk about cutting back and living more simply. We *yearn* for that sort of discovery that this family makes together, where these kind of ties matter, where morals are more important than dollars. And Hansberry does it right in front of you, you watch it happen. So that's why, for me at least, I want people to resonate with those kinds of issues and then when they do I think they'll recognize the goodness in themselves and other people and we'll get better because of it.

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