

Lorraine Hansberry's Influence on Black Arts Movement Drama

By Amanda Elnahwy



Dawn Ursula, left, as Ruth Younger and Will Cobbs as Walter in *A Raisin in the Sun* at Arena Stage.
(Photo courtesy C. Stanley Photography)

“Dreams can come true with the help of a family”

The Black Arts Movement was founded in 1965, the same year Lorraine Hansberry passed away due to pancreatic cancer, but that does not mean her influence was any less than that of those who lived through this time in history. The significance of her play *A Raisin in the Sun* was that it was the first play written by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway. This began the opening of many opportunities for African Americans to take place in theatre, and her cast of almost all black people bulldozed the racial barriers that were present there. It gave the African American community of the time a steppingstone on which to showcase themselves and jumpstart the era on which to prove themselves equal. Though Hansberry's death was towards the end of civil rights movement, it gave both an inspiring foundation on which to begin the Black Arts Movement and a boost to push it forward with an impactful work the Black community, as well as others, could not ignore.

The impact this had on future Broadway plays changed for the better. After Hansberry's passing, her husband Robert Nemiroff published her unfinished work that also premiered on Broadway in 1968, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black*, which featured not only traditional musicals, but also jazz, blues and gospel. It helped, in part, to spark a new era of Broadway musicals. In May of 1978 the musical *Ain't Misbehavin* featured a cast of mainly African American woman, and in 1981 *Dreamgirls* premiered also with primarily

African American actors. Let us not forget *Hamilton* premiering in 2015, which used African Americans and Latinos to represent higher reins of power that were known to be white: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Aaron Burr. Though we have progressed immensely from 1965 to 2015, Broadway would have never gotten there without the help of Lorraine Hansberry's raw playwriting talent.

The specific play *A Raisin in the Sun* showcased the underlying morals and ideas embraced later throughout the Black Arts Movement. According to Candace L. Baker, "Hansberry's work has been considered to be only a precursor of BAM, and she [was] a grandmother of the movement." Two main ideas she conveyed her play were the celebration of African heritage, and that Black is beautiful. The key character to push those notions was Beneatha's friend Joseph Asagai. He was "constantly try[ing] to convince Bennie to discover her 'black roots.'" Through these actions, Hansberry successfully implements the idea of "Black is beautiful" and that African Americans should be celebrated and not cast aside.

Sources

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