

Review: 'Raisin in the Sun' paints vibrant family portrait

Amy Stumpfl Updated 10:24 a.m. CT March 28, 2017

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Theater review

It's been nearly 60 years since Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" first debuted on Broadway. But as Nashville Repertory Theatre's marvelous staging demonstrates, this landmark drama remains as powerful — and relevant — as ever.

Exploring the hopes, dreams and crushing struggles of an African-American family in 1950s Chicago, the play takes its name from a line in a Langston Hughes' poem — "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?"

For the Younger family matriarch Lena, that dream involves owning a decent home, and putting her daughter Beneatha through medical school with the \$10,000 life insurance policy left by her late husband. But her frustrated son Walter Lee has bigger plans, hoping to invest in a business of his own.

Directed by producing artistic director, René D. Copeland, the Rep's production beautifully balances the humor and heartbreak of the Younger family. And beyond potent themes of racial inequality, it highlights the age-old battle between generations — the parents who cling to their values and the children in search of their own.

Jackie Welch embodies the quiet dignity of Lena, a woman often bewildered by the restless rancor of her offspring. But she's at her best when she lets loose with Lena's hard-won wisdom, slapping down Beneatha's new-fangled ideas and reminding us that "there is always something left to love" in our fellow man.

Former Tennessee Titan Eddie George takes on the daunting role of Walter Lee. It would be easy to play the part purely as a bully, but George finds some nice moments to reveal his character's oft-hidden charms. I'd love to see a more gradual build to Act II's big climax, but it's a solid performance, nonetheless.

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Meanwhile, Lauren F. Jones shines as Beneatha, injecting an irresistible sense of hope and energy into every scene. James Rudolph and Brandon Hirsch are excellent as Beneatha's very different suitors. Hirsch's monologue in Act II is particularly moving — and distressingly timely. The always-reliable Matthew Carlton also is terrific as Karl Linder, the weaselly messenger from the white neighborhood where the Youngers plan to move.

But it's Tamiko Robinson Steele who delivers the evening's most gut-wrenching performance as Walter Lee's weary wife, Ruth. So much of Robinson Steele's nuanced characterization lives behind her eyes. It's a remarkable portrayal from start to finish.

Gary C. Hoff's scenic/properties design is wonderfully detailed, though not as cramped and claustrophobic as one might expect. Trish Clark's costumes reflect the era nicely, and Phillip Franck's lighting/sound capture some great details, right down to the hum of a neighbor's vacuum.

Hansberry once said that “in order to create the universal, you must pay very great attention to the specific.” And so it is with the Rep’s engrossing production of this true American classic.

If you go

What: Nashville Repertory Theatre presents “A Raisin in the Sun”

When: Extended through April 22. Performances at 6:30 p.m. Wednesdays-Thursdays; 7:30 p.m. Fridays; 2:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays.

Where: TPAC’s Johnson Theater, 505 Deaderick St.

Tickets: starting at \$45

Contact: nashvillerep.org or 615-782-4040