

*Playing in the Dark/Musicalizing A Raisin in the Sun*  
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**ABSTRACT**

While *A Raisin in the Sun* continues to have a strong hold on the U.S. cultural imagination, the musical version *Raisin* has virtually disappeared from stages and academic histories. But in 1973, when the musical opened on Broadway, it received glowing accolades, moreso than Lorraine Hansberry's play. Revisiting *Raisin* provides a productive site for processing changing cultural hierarchies of plays versus musicals and the politics of African-American representation. I argue that Robert Nemiroff and his largely white production team tamed *A Raisin in the Sun* into a popular, feel-good black musical that the predominantly white audience welcomed in the wake of radical racial politics, war, and the economic downturn. I use Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* to analyze the binary between the silent white and singing black characters, and how the musical styles and content play to expectations of blackness haunted by minstrelsy.

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*Playing in the Dark/Musicalizing A Raisin in the Sun*

From the 2014 Broadway revival starring Denzel Washington to the "diversity" (read: non-white) slot in school syllabi, *A Raisin in the Sun* continues to have a strong hold on the U.S. cultural imagination. In 2011, Bruce Norris won the Pulitzer Prize for *Clybourne Park*, in which he considers the white neighbors and neighborhood before the Younger family moves in and then the process of gentrification fifty years later. In the 2012-13 season, *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Clybourne Park* were among the top ten most produced plays by members of Theatre Communications Group (TCG), the national trade organization for major theatre companies (Goia). Hansberry's play was the only classic on the list.

I harp on the visibility of *A Raisin in the Sun* to throw into relief the obscurity of the musical version, *Raisin*. The musical was written by a mostly white production team; Robert Nemiroff and Charlotte Zaltzberg penned the book, Judd Woldin the music, and Robert Brittan the lyrics, while Donald McKayle directed and choreographed. It premiered in 1973 at Arena Stage in Washington, D.C., transferred to Broadway, and went on an extensive national tour. Given the popularity of Hansberry's play and black musicals among regional theatres, it is from a commercial perspective surprising that *Raisin* is so rarely seen on stage. Recent New York-based productions of the musical since it closed in 1975 include one by Equity Library Theatre in 1981 and one by Manhattan Theatre Lab High School in 2009. Musicologist Elizabeth Wollman argues that the early 70s are remembered as weak years for Broadway musicals. At the 1974 Tony Awards, *Raisin* competed with similarly "forgotten" musicals, *Seesaw* and *Over Here!* However, memory is political, and one should remember that the 1970s

produced *Purlie*, *The Wiz*, and *Ain't Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, among many other black musicals.

*Raisin* the musical also remains shrouded in literary and musical histories. *Hansberry's Drama* by Steven R. Carter includes only two pages on the musical version, which is allegedly "Delightful but derivative and ultimately less complex and satisfying than its source" (80). Lawrence P. Jackson and Richard Iton write on *A Raisin in the Sun* and other canonical texts and elements of popular culture at length in *The Indignant Generation* and *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, respectively. Although both are interested in issues of art, politics, and popularity, neither mentions the musical. Even Allen Woll's *Black Musical Theatre: From Coontown to Dreamgirls* devotes only one page to *Raisin*; granted, his book is a survey, and it is the only book of its kind. He argues that there is little scholarship on black musicals because of the tacit racism of scholars that dismiss African Americans' contributions and because of the shame scholars feel concerning the form's origins in minstrelsy. Minstrelsy certainly haunts musical theatre, especially black performance. The very act of musicalization has the possibility of neutering the radical nature of a text and confirming stereotypes of associating African Americans with music. As sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva noted in his 1998 Detroit Area Study, 63 percent of blacks agreed that "musical" was "more descriptive of blacks" (76).

More scholars from Eric Lott to Jayna Brown have studied minstrelsy since 1989 when Woll made these claims, but I would add that part of the lingering absence of black musical analysis is because much of musical and black theatre scholarship uses evolutionary structures to tell cultural narratives. Works such as *The Rise and Fall of the Broadway Musical* by Mark N. Grant detail the "progress" or "rise" of the musical from the loosely strung-together numbers in revues of the 1920s to the integrated book musicals in which song, setting, character, theme, and story all seem of a piece in the "Golden Age," roughly the late 1930s through the late 1960s.[1] This narrative also racializes dramatic forms, implicitly aligning revues with black artists and book musicals with white, often Jewish, artists. In 2014, the only "black musicals" on Broadway have been arguably revues: *Motown*, *After Midnight*, and *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill*. Henry D. Miller similarly begins his *Theorizing Black Theatre* with Bob Cole's and Will Marion Cook's musicals and ends with Black Arts theatre, suggesting advancement from blackface musical comedies to serious political art drama. Furthermore, very few black musicals have been allowed to enter the musical canon, namely *Dreamgirls* and *Porgy and Bess*, whose substance largely relies on stereotypes and, for the latter, opera's cultural capital. Even fewer have been fully written by, about, for, and near African-Americans, to use W.E.B. Du Bois's formulation. Anxiety about white-written-and-produced musicals starring black performers continue to materialize in critical reviews as recently as those for *Memphis* in 2009. *Raisin* does not fit into narratives of progress in musical and African-American theatre; to musicalize what is now perhaps the most exalted African-American play can be seen as regressing.

What interests me here is the relative (un)popularity of *Raisin* in relation to *A Raisin in the Sun* and what that suggests about musicals and dramas, blacks and whites in cultural hierarchies. The musical production relied upon Hansberry's text and competed with it, running on Broadway for 300 more performances yet taking up less space in the cultural imaginary. As David Savran and Stacy Wolf remind us, musicals are typically viewed as frivolous for their more explicit commercialism, popularity, and pleasure in comparison to dramas. When

considering race, hierarchies within the U.S. musical oeuvre itself become starkly marked, creating a world in which predominantly white critics place *The Wizard of Oz* over *The Wiz*, and segregate the “Golden Age” of musicals, which is unmarked but implicitly white, from “black musicals.” The interactions of race and cultural, symbolic, and economic capital thus play important roles in how *Raisin* and *A Raisin in the Sun* are valued and (re)produced, which *Raisin* gets to be in the sun and which one in the dark.

I turn to performance and the archives to address the popular presence of the *Raisin* musical on stage from 1973-1975 versus its relative absence from cultural memory and scholarship thereafter. Because I have never seen a live performance of *Raisin*, and I was not even alive during the initial run—though even if I were, that would not mean I could have grasped all there is to the musical—my work relies upon various sources. The Broadway cast recording provides some sense of the musical performances, but the studio locks in a single, edited version. The Theatre on Film and Tape Archive at the New York Public Library does not have a video of the “original”[2] production; however, it does have a video of the Tony Awards in 1974 in which cast members of *Raisin* performed two songs, and it has a video of a production done by TheatreWorks in California in 1998. These videos suggest stagings, and the former is particularly useful to consider why the producers would showcase those two particular songs and performers. Meanwhile, the Arena Stage archive at George Mason University in Fairfax, Virginia includes documents that hint at the development of the musical in relation to the artists and audiences. Finally, reviews suggest the response of largely white critics and audiences, who desired safer representations of African Americans that the musical creators mediated.

Intertwining and interrogating popularity and blackness, I argue that *Raisin* translates and tames the play into and through musical theatre. Revisiting *Raisin* provides a productive site for processing changing cultural hierarchies of plays versus musicals and the politics of African-American representation. It allows us to reconsider the terms of *A Raisin in the Sun*'s contemporary canonization versus the musical's relative popularity in the 1970s, the latter of which will be my focus here. When set off against the Black Arts Movement, *Raisin*'s integrationist narrative was likely more acceptable at this time than fifteen years prior. I argue that Nemiroff and his production team adapted *A Raisin in the Sun* into a popular, feel-good black musical that the predominantly white audience desired in the wake of radical racial politics, war, and the economic downturn. But bear in mind that the musical and play are not so easily separable or stable. *Raisin* is titularly a part of the play, musicalizing and dancing some parts while excising others. *A Raisin in the Sun* also changed from Chicago to New York, stage to screen, and Hansberry's death to her ex-husband and heir Robert Nemiroff's additions to the script licensed today (King 117-123). He was part of the musical creative team, which consisted almost entirely of white artists, complicating an understanding of *Raisin* as a “black” musical.

Here I find Toni Morrison's concept of American Africanism, the ways black stereotypes and surrogates off-set white freedom, useful in its application to *Raisin*, though I also wish to test the theory's limits. In *Playing in the Dark*, she defines “Africanism” as “the denotative and connotative blackness that African people have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreading that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people” (6-7). Her interventions on how U.S. critical writing largely ignored race and/or focused on the victims of oppression, obscuring the mutually constituting production of white and black

in the literary imagination, have become extremely influential since she gave her lectures in 1990. But *Playing in the Dark* seems to have had little traction in the emerging field of musical theatre studies. While Morrison applied her theory to canonical U.S. literature, my primary text is a musical version of a canonical play for which multivalent authorship complicates production and reception. Whereas Hemmingway used an economy of language to signify black characters, the white librettists, composer, and lyricist adapted Hansberry's words, which were directed, choreographed, performed, and to some extent embodied by demonstrably black artists on a stage, seen by a predominantly white audience. The contemporary hegemony of realism in U.S. theatre is different from that of literature, and particularly when it comes to black bodies on the stage versus black ink on the page, spectators can take for granted the dialogue, music, dance, and socio-cultural situation as authorized and authenticated by black performers.

I am also playing with Morrison's concentration on black surrogates to consider white surrogates. Although the musical is not centered on white characters, there is still a binary between the silent whites and singing blacks on and off stage, and how the musical styles and content play to expectations of blackness. Because most of the libretto consists of Hansberry's dialogue, my analysis focuses on the interpolated musical numbers as acts of American Africanism that enact safe, desired representations. The songs and dances often position the black characters as somehow naturally exceptional at performance in contrast to whites. In addition, the excised abortion, class conflict, and anti-imperialist discourses de-radicalize the text. Advertisements and reviews of the musical largely reify Africanism by confirming stereotypes and searching for an assumed, coherent black authenticity, though white producers and consumers remain the arbiters of taste. And in the end, the musical loses out to the play.

## Production History

When *A Raisin in the Sun* opened on the Great White Way in 1959, critics recognized the watershed moment of the first Broadway play to be written by a black woman and directed by a black man, Lloyd Richards. The play was a serious, realist family drama, and many compared it to *Death of a Salesman*, intimating the plays' alleged universalist appeal. In an interview with Hansberry, Studs Terkel remarked, "I'm sure you've been told a number of times, 'This is not really a Negro play. It could be about anybody,'" to which Hansberry sighed and replied:

Invariably. I know what they're trying to say: it is not the traditional "Negro play." It isn't a protest play. It isn't something that hits you over the head. What they're trying to say is something very good; that they believe the characters transcend category. Unfortunately, they couldn't be more wrong. I believe one of the most sound ideas in dramatic writing is that in order to create the universal, you must pay great attention to the specific. Not only is this a play about a Negro family, specifically and definitely culturally ... it is definitely a Negro play before it is anything else."(282-283)

Hansberry criticizes the idea of racial transcendence and definition of "Negro play" as only "protest play." But she also appeals to an aesthetic argument of the specific leading to the

universal, though this argument is racialized and classed. The Broadway audience was still largely white and upper middle class, leading some like Amiri Baraka to deride *A Raisin in the Sun* as a “bourgeois” drama. Then again, Harilaos Stecopoulos argues that the play “is less a symptom than a diagnosis of the black ambivalence about normative (white) notions of embourgeoisement” (210). She argues that through appropriation of 1930s leftist, white ethnic melodrama, such as the plays of Clifford Odets, Hansberry centers domestic women and their critiques of capitalism and racism. It is likely because of the interaction of these aesthetic and political qualities that Hansberry won the New York Drama Critics Award, another triumph as the first black playwright to do so.

Aside from the critical accolades, however, *A Raisin in the Sun* was not immediately, widely embraced. Hansberry was, as many scholars now remind us, a radical advocating for black, women’s, and gay rights. Her first play ran on Broadway for just over a year, and though it became a film to reach a potentially larger audience, Hansberry’s screenplay was heavily policed, and the film was not commercially successful. Her then ex-husband Robert Nemiroff kept her next play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein’s Window*, running until Hansberry died of cancer in 1965. In charge of Hansberry’s estate, Nemiroff devoted himself to producing her legacy and the capitals that entailed by adapting *Les Blancs* and *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* for the stage. According to *The Arena Adventure*, Arena Stage’s self-narrative, Nemiroff had been pitching a musical adaptation of *A Raisin in the Sun* to commercial producers for eight years before the non-profit theatre premiered the musical and sent it to Broadway in 1973 (Maslon 50).

Although the highbrow bias against musicals likely played a role in stalling the musicalization of *A Raisin in the Sun*, the poor state of black musicals in the sixties was also likely a factor. According to Allen Woll, the black-written-by-white musicals of the sixties, such as *Kwamina*, *No Strings*, and *Hallelujah, Baby* were flops because they avoided dealing with the complexities of contemporary racial tensions. He cites the musical *Purlie* in 1970 as a turning point marking the revival of successful black musicals.[3] The links between *Purlie* and *Raisin* are significant. When Ossie Davis joined his wife Ruby Dee by replacing Sidney Poitier in *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway, he persuaded the producer to stage his play *Purlie Victorious*. In turn, the musical version of *Purlie* arguably facilitated the production of the musical *Raisin*. Woll also cites the growing number of black dramas of the sixties, the foundation of the Negro Ensemble Company, the support from the Ford Foundation, and the growing black audience as reasons for the renewed popularity of black musicals by the 1970s (249). Musicals such as *Ain’t Supposed to Die a Natural Death*, *Eubie!*, and *Ain’t Misbehavin’* became part of this trend.

Meanwhile, at Arena Stage, co-founder and artistic director Zelda Fichandler called for more black theatre. She observed a “profound aesthetic dislocation” between the whites on stage and in the audience of Arena versus the majority African-American population of Washington, D.C. (Fichandler D-1). In 1968, after the success of *The Great White Hope*, a new play about black boxing champion Jack Johnson that famously starred James Earl Jones and moved to Broadway, she formed a Ford-funded resident acting ensemble of black and white actors. The multiracial productions, however, proved unpopular and financially unsustainable. The following

season, Fichandler produced Charles Gordone's *No Place to Be Somebody*, indicating her commitment to cultivating black artists and the black audiences she hoped would follow.

*Raisin* marked the beginning of successful productions of black musicals at Arena Stage. The musical received glowing reviews from D.C.-area critics and grossed more than any production in the company's twenty-three-year history. The stage managers' reports suggest the enthusiasm of audiences because they almost always gave standing ovations, which was then a rare occurrence. The stage manager occasionally noted the presence of black spectators, as if this were an unusual occurrence, and racialized audience responses. On July 21, there was allegedly a "Very good audience – lot of Blacks in the audience," while the next day the "Audience was all white (mostly) and dull" (Head). Nemiroff had planned all along for the musical to move to Broadway where it ran for nearly two years and won the Tony Awards for Best Musical and Lead Actress. The production subsequently went on a forty-two-city tour. Despite its critical acclaim and commercial success at Arena Stage, the production never recouped its investment.

### **Musicalizing African Americans**

*Raisin* signals from the start that it will expand upon *A Raisin in the Sun* to musicalized and danced representations of not only the Younger family but also the black community in the U.S. During the overture, which interweaves jazz and blues themes from the score by white composer Judd Woldin, the ensemble dances a mini-drama, an allegedly typical night on the South Side of Chicago in the 1950s, and perhaps more closely Washington, D.C. and New York City in the 1970s. This includes "groovy cats" wearing "doo-rags," attractive "chicks," a drunk, a drug pusher, and his "victim" (Brustein, et. al. 13). The dance-drama by black director-choreographer Donald McKayle suggests the higher brow emulation of *West Side Story*, along with attendant severity and seediness to confirm Africanist expectations and to establish the setting an exceptional and aspirational black family like the Youngers would want to leave.

When the spotlight shifts to the Younger family, Walter emerges as the protagonist. His is the first song, "Man Say," which appropriates much of Hansberry's dialogue set to a Calypso tune. While Ruth speaks her lines urging Walter to eat his eggs and come down to earth, Walter and his triumphant music in this I am/I want song easily overcome her, letting the audience know that they and the music should be on his side. Indeed, throughout the musical, the spectator is following Walter's journey, who sings eight songs, whereas the play emphasizes the power of the female characters, Lena, Ruth, and Beneatha. This change is due in part to a reduction of Beneatha's role (several of her songs were cut because the director had trouble with the actress, who was replaced by her understudy Debbie Allen) and a desire for a more "traditional" narrative with a black, male protagonist as in the patriarchal through-line of black nationalism.

The choral numbers Walter leads both confirm and critique the place of black working-class people in ways that reify the privileged position of whiteness. Although Walter is making a deal to open a liquor store, "Booze" seems largely a reason for a jazzy, up-tempo number for which the black performers can sing and dance the praises of alcohol. It can delight the audience and yet it can be uncomfortable for the way it seems to advocate that black people just love booze, the one way to "chase the blues" (Brustein, et. al. 37). In "Runnin' to Meet the Man," Walter sings, "Jammed up people / Shufflin' along like an army of ants, / Doin' the same old

dance,” describing the literal movement of people crammed into subway cars and the resemblance to minstrel shuffling (Brustein, et. al. 27). The pulsating staccato rhythm mirrors this movement, and the music starts and ends similarly, creating a sense of circularity, the trapped state of these workers. In the TheatreWorks production from 1998, the ensemble members mimed doing physical labor—shoveling, scrubbing floors—as if to signify the work black people do and habitus they possess. Meanwhile, Walter’s boss speaks his orders off-stage over the music. This dynamic defines the black performers as those who do musical labor against the white performer who talks as a disembodied voice attempting to command the musical world. In some sense, he is like the audience members who sit apart from the music and the labor yet engage with the performers with their applause. This applause can be at once for the performers’ virtuosity, performance of blackness through the “Shufflin’” and singing, and criticism of the conditions for black labor.

Aside from Walter’s unseen boss, the only other white character in the musical is Karl Lindner who similarly does not sing. When he enters the Youngers’ home, the reprise of “Sweet Time,” Ruth and Walter’s romantic duet, ends abruptly, emphasizing Lindner’s dramaturgical function as a non-musical force. Instead of Hansberry’s long, intricate scene in which Lindner appears concerned for the Youngers and for himself, Lindner barely speaks in the musical. His dialogue is full of ellipses, dashes, “ah”s, and stage business such as clearing his throat until he says he is from the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, at which point “*With controlled anger, Walter takes a step towards him, brandishing the card almost under his nose, and Lindner draws back,*” and the scene ends immediately (Brustein, et. al. 80). Perhaps the deletion was due to a presumption that the audience was already familiar with Lindner’s ultimate intentions, as Walter seems to be here. In any case, part of the consequence is once again a major instance of American Africanism, the definition of Lindner and whites in general as precisely not black, not musical in that he cannot express himself through song and dance, and he can barely speak.

In the musical, Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha sing mockingly on his behalf to Lena in what is on the one hand the most radical and on the other the most moderate song in the score, “Not Anymore.” The characters act like they are the Clybourne Park welcoming committee by whitening up. Walter in particular adopts a nasally voice and affected, upper-class gestures. In this intensely ironic number, the characters sing about all of the racist things they do not do anymore (“We didn’t bring no rope!”), though the mock-hymn, vaudeville-style music, and exaggerated movements act as punchlines suggesting lynchings continue (“*The three hang themselves—one arm up taut, the other at the neck, head dangling limp*”) (Brustein, et. al. 83). The song punctures hypocritical behavior, such as when Beneatha adopts a Southern drawl and claims, “Why some of my best friends have skin!” but recoils once she turns around and registers Walter’s black body (Brustein, et. al. 84). But perhaps the most critical part of the song is the point at which the characters exalt the NAACP, Lena Horne, and Harry Belafonte, sexy-without-being-threatening bourgeois representations of blackness. Beneatha remarks, “I wouldn’t mind *him* livin’ next door to me!” while the song ends with the characters insisting to pay to keep their neighborhood white (Brustein, et. al. 85). Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha therefore demonstrate a certain performativity to whiteness in how whites disavow race and racism except for the few comfortable examples of blackness they like, the real gestures that undermine their vocal performance, and the fact that the act of racist disavowal is meant to fortify whiteness. Thus, whites do not deliver believable

musical performances. Many of the lyrics are spoke-sung and taken from Lindner's speech in the play. In contrast, then, blackness as tied to song and dance takes on an apparent naturalness, even though number after number in this musical consists of black performers entertaining a largely white audience. But overall "Not Anymore," a kind of "reverse" minstrel number given the musical idiom, reveals the complex layers and instability of performing race: black actors playing black characters mock-playing white characters perform a song written by white artists taking lines from a black playwright.

On the other hand, "Not Anymore" can be considered rather moderate when the spectators are placed in the privileged position of believing themselves to be not racist unlike the whites being mocked in the song. Unlike *A Raisin in the Sun*, the musical emerged from the post-Civil Rights era. Even attending *Raisin* the musical involves a self-selecting audience that would likely be at least sympathetic to African Americans. But again, the song does not strongly challenge the spectator to become not only not racist but antiracist; it does not necessarily implicate the audience in the structures of white supremacy. Because the musical is set in the 1950s, "Not Anymore" may be ironic for that time period, and the audience might believe that by 1973 the lyrics are not true anymore, as if racism has been solved, and they can congratulate themselves on their liberal beliefs. Such a message and musical presentation would be much more comforting than another Black Arts play with a radical structure and politics.

The musical also boasts a gospel number, "He Come Down This Morning," which plays upon audience expectations of popular African American music and religiosity, thanks to Langston Hughes's introduction of gospel to the U.S. musical (Woll 229-248). The number is full of call-and-response, repetition, a certain idiolect ("He Come Down" instead of "He Came Down"), movement, and virtuosic performances by Travis and Lena, rather than significant character development. In musical parlance, it is the second-act opener to welcome back the audience into a comfortable theatrical world. In this case, it is a particularly raced world where the black community minus Walter and Beneatha sing and dance the gospel, while the audience generally remains seated, getting to enjoy this voyeuristic view into black life and to conceive of white congregations as the supposed civilized, less performative opposite.

This issue of civilization is particularly fraught with respect to the two Africana numbers in the musical. When Asagai explains to Beneatha the meaning of "Alaiyo," he drapes the cloth he has given her, as African drums begin to play in the background. His lyrics name these drums, "Heartbeats tell me... / Beating like drums of my home / Calling my name / We have made our two different worlds the same, Alaiyo" (Brustein, et. al. 46-47). This is a didactic song meant for Beneatha but also for the audience who can assemble the clothing, musical, and linguistic signifiers of American Africanism. Over time, the orchestrations become fuller, resembling descent-into-the-jungle motifs of 1930s foreign-set Hollywood films, as a flute for instance sounds an exotic bird. Shortly thereafter, an extended sequence directly from Hansberry's text shows Beneatha critiquing Ruth for listening to "assimilationist junk," popular blues, in favor of "real music," which was Michael Olatunji's "Drums of Passion" in the original musical production (76). When Beneatha performs what she believes are African dances, Ruth in turn critiques her and implicitly the ease of appropriating culture. This critique, however, becomes muddled in the musical. Upon Walter's drunken entrance, the stage becomes full of African women and warriors. A production still from the Arena Stage mounting shows that the ensemble



wore little more than thongs, reinforcing the idea of Africans as tribal and barbaric. By physically manifesting Walter's drunken vision of Africa, the musical undermines Hansberry's critique that most people think only of Tarzan when they think of Africa and rather authorizes this belief for the audience's consumption of bare black bodies. Several critics cited these numbers, "Alaiyo" and the African dance, as their favorites, suggesting the appeal of these images and sounds of an imagined Africa to U.S. audiences.

In addition, many of these ensemble numbers expand upon the Younger family unit to the larger community and serve as release valves for the dramatic tension. In so doing, they often reify the cultural values embedded in the serious drama versus light-hearted musical dynamic. Between Lena's bluesy yet optimistic "A Whole Lotta Sunlight" and "Booze," for example, is Hansberry's scene of Beneatha proclaiming her atheism and Lena slapping her, a sound that registers much louder than the surrounding musical scenes. The musical team largely avoids musicalizing the most dramatic moments of *A Raisin in the Sun*, which is the opposite approach of many integrated book musicals because the music can help to express those heightened moments more deeply and complexly. Instead, music in *Raisin* tends to express emotion with little change throughout the song or to entertain the audience with its familiar portrayals of African Americans.

As discussed in "Man Say," the music is on Walter's side throughout, so silence is used purposefully to indicate where he has gone wrong. Music underscores the scene in which Walter tells his family he will call Karl Lindner and accept his offer until he plays the minstrel slave. The speaking over the music—not singing—and then silence work to locate the power in Hansberry's text and to clarify for the audience that they should condemn this particular unsympathetic portrayal of a black man, in contrast to the music-supported supposedly authentic ones. Ultimately, Walter changes his mind and asserts his pride, masculinity, and decision to move to Clybourne Park, just as Lena hums and the orchestra plays "He Come Down this Morning," which points to the influence of God in this outcome "to show His children the way" rather than black agency (Brustein, et. al. 65, 98-100). Rather than the final tableau showing Lena retrieving her potted plant alone, Walter picks it up and gives it to her, spotlighting Walter's dramatic arc.

The excised parts of *A Raisin in the Sun* are, like the musical additions, significant in constituting and being constituted by acceptable black images. According to Carter, who dealt extensively with Nemiroff, "To gain time for the music, large chunks of the play, such as Ruth's deliberations about abortion, Asagai's male chauvinist speeches, everything relating to George Murchison, and the bulk of Lindner's first visit, had to be eliminated" (79). The reasoning "had to" in order to "gain time for the music," works to depoliticize the importance of those elements. In the musical, Ruth does not deliberate about abortion because she is not even pregnant, perhaps because abortion would have been extremely contentious in 1973, the same year of the *Roe v. Wade* decision. Partially as a result, her relationship with Walter is much warmer as exemplified by their reconciliation duet, "Sweet Time." The libretto note for this song urges, "Musically, the quality should be Black—the Blackest interpretation possible—a cry from the heart with all the subtleties, the broken lines and jagged edges and, where appropriate, the freely improvised quarter-notes of Soul. But none of this for embellishment—only where and to the extent it enhances true feeling" (Brustein, et. al. 56). Again, "Black" music is defined by its alleged authenticity of feeling rather than rehearsed performance, presumably of white music. But to

return to the musical's edits: Asagai's "male chauvinist speeches" are those related to radical nationalism that become vaguer and even a joke. Asagai in his Yoruba regalia unintentionally scares the neighbor Mrs. Johnson who shrieks, "Lord have mercy, the Maus Maus!!!," the sole reference to violent resistance of colonial oppression in the musical (Brustein, et. al. 54). Finally, the removal of George Murchison flattens the intraracial class conflicts that Hansberry explores in the play. In a sense, Beneatha and Asagai become the comic b-plot couple to the a-plot romance of Ruth and Walter, a common musical theatre trope that tames *A Raisin in the Sun*.

### **Advertising and Consuming *Raisin***

In promotional materials, the producers regularly praised and domesticated Hansberry. In the program book for the Arena Stage production, the biography of Hansberry never mentions her radical political work. Instead, the focus is on how she spoke the "truth" about African Americans and you can hear her doing so; the biography ends with an ad for consuming her: "Excerpts of the best of Lorraine Hansberry's speeches and interviews can be heard on the recently released record *Lorraine Hansberry Speaks Out: Art and the Black Revolution* (Playbill).

For the Tony Awards, the producers carefully chose two numbers to represent—and advertise—*Raisin*, "Sidewalk Tree" and "A Whole Lotta Sunlight." Esther Rolle introduced Ralph Carter, who played Travis in the musical, as her son on *Good Times*, and then Carter launched into his song about how he would rather stay by his "Sidewalk Tree" than move to Clybourne Park, though he will have the "good things daddy never had" (Brustein, et. al. 81). Reminiscent of a young Michael Jackson, Carter was frequently singled out in reviews for his vocal and physical virtuosity and implicitly for his attractive innocence. Virginia Capers was similarly introduced by a black actress when she performed "A Whole Lotta Sunlight," a blues in which Lena sings to her potted plant with nature and religious imagery—sounds and themes that resonate with her other solo, "Measure the Valleys." With closed eyes, rocking back and forth in her chair, Capers created a serious portrayal of this black mother so typical in popular depictions and won the best actress in a musical award. According to critic Richard Leberz, "There was something brutal and unpleasant about Claudia McNeil's Mama in the original production, but Virginia Caper's Mama has all the warmth, confusion and beauty that she was meant to have." Here, a critic prefers the musical for its softer presentation of Lena that is allegedly also truer. When *Raisin* won the Tony Award for best musical, Robert Nemiroff accepted, praised Hansberry, and articulated that the Yiddish and black view of life are similar, perhaps to explain his presence and/or attract a Jewish audience at the expense of downplaying specific African-American cultural and material conditions. In contrast, the representatives of *The River Niger*, winner for best play, explained that the principles of playwright Douglas Turner Ward kept him from attending, a disruption in the apparent integrated harmony of the 1974 Tony Awards.

While today many ignore or snub the musicalized version of *A Raisin in the Sun*, in 1973, the overwhelming majority of New York and D.C. critics lauded, even preferred the musical to the play. Clive Barnes of the *New York Times* argued that the libretto was stronger than the play, and in a universalist-colorblind turn claimed, "Today it is not the color of the piece that overwhelms one but its tremendous story." David Richards of the *Washington Star* similarly asserted, "There may be a few grumblings among those who expect black theater to be abrasive

and accusatory, and who will hence be impatient with the love and humanity that fill the theater to the bursting point,” thereby contrasting the musical with what is perceived as the typical “Negro plays” that Hansberry articulated as protest plays. In the early 70s context of the Vietnam War, Black Power, and economic recession, it is not surprising that critics and audiences would largely favor upbeat integration narratives and more palatable representations of African Americans, especially through a musical.

Critical discussions about racializing the score, however, reveal fissures in interpretations of authenticity and performance. Gerard A. Perseghin for instance applauded the “Afro-influence music,” particularly the jazz and scat singing of “Booze,” the gospel number “He Come Down This Morning,” and “Man Say,” which showed “the influence of the delicate West Indian Islands ballads.” Meanwhile, a few other critics asserted that the music is not black at all. In *Black Stage*, Judith L. Howell wrote with disappointment, “They needed Curtis Mayfield, or Marvin Gaye or Jerry Butler, (he’s right there in Chicago; he’ll tell you ‘bout Southside songs).” Her diction implies an empathetic insider audience, and her critique confronts the white construction of black music. She adds, “Leave it to white folks to write a poor score and then go out and get some baad [sic] musicians to try and salvage it,” at which point she names the black musical director and vocal arranger and the many musicians who “really giggered and try to funk it up as best they could.” Somewhat like the inner musical-dramatic world of *Raisin* itself, Howell locates authentic black music in black artists. R. H. Gardner similarly disparaged the score:

[It] is far from being a jazz score. Nor, despite one number performed in a church, is it gospel, soul or any of the other idioms associated with the black experience. Indeed, the only “ethnic” influence apparent in the music—and the same goes for Mr. Brittan’s lyrics and Donald McKayle’s choreography—is Broadway. The result is the whitest black production since the beginning of the black revolution.

Gardner sees music in black and white terms, though Broadway is more mixed, but the point that the musical seems “white” (Comfortable? Apparently unmarked? Commercial as opposed to soulful and improvised?) makes him skeptical of the musical and the audience’s standing ovation, either “genuine enthusiasm” or “guilt-feelings.”

While Howell and Gardner valued what they considered black musical authenticity, many implicitly and explicitly expressed a value system of white standards. Critic Tom Basham meant as a compliment, “It is a tribute to the skill of the entire company that this story of a black Chicago family has pulling power for a mostly white audience,” implying that white audiences generally do not care for black-centered narratives. In letters to Nemiroff, Fichandler repeatedly aired anxieties about the musical becoming too comic, perhaps because of fears of minstrelsy. She expressed surprise to hear from Nemiroff that the white audiences on Broadway were resistant to the musical given that it is “so universal,” and added, “I do hope that the show comes from the heart still. If it doesn’t, it will seem to the white audiences to be a black show.” This construction equates whiteness with heart-felt, universal stories in contrast to black productions.

*Raisin* capitalized on *A Raisin in the Sun* in a climate more receptive to its integrationist politics and musicalization. Its musical form and safer representations through acts of American Africanism suggest reasons for its popularity in the 1970s. Yet these acts of taming may also

signify the limits to the musical's ascribed value and popularity today because plays and Hansberry's legacy have higher positions in the cultural hierarchy.

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[1] I put "Golden Age" into scare quotes here to indicate that I do not believe the so-called integrated musicals typically classified in this way are the best, though I still find its historical connotation to be useful.

[2] I say "original" because, as Bruce Kirle argues in *Unfinished Show Business*, musicals are inherently multiple due to different performers and libretti, as is the case for *Raisin*, which has significant changes in the Arena Stage and Broadway iterations.

[3] I would add that the creative team of Garry Sherman, Peter Udell, and Philip Rose behind *Purlie* may have initiated a trend in musicalizing recent black plays. This same team musicalized James Baldwin's *The Amen Corner* and developed a Harlem-based version of *A Christmas Carol*, neither of which were commercial successes.

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