

# Lorraine Hansberry

Hansberry, Lorraine



## Record Information

Source: Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, New York World-Telegram and Sun Collection.

Record Type: Photograph or Illustration

Date: b. 1930–d. 1965

## Description:

In 1959 Lorraine Hansberry became the first African-American woman to have a play produced on Broadway. Her first work, *A Raisin in the Sun*, which depicted the struggles of a working-class black family, was a critical and popular success.

Lorraine Vivian **Hansberry** is best known for her award-winning story of black American life, *A Raisin in the Sun* (New York: Random House, 1959), the first play written by an African-American woman to be produced on Broadway. *Raisin* opened on Broadway in 1959. In 1964, **Hansberry** had a second play on Broadway, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, which was still running when she died of cancer in 1965.

**Hansberry**, born in Chicago, on May 19, 1930, was the daughter of a well-to-do businessman who founded one of Chicago's first black banks. When Lorraine was eight years old, her father tried to move his family into an all-white neighborhood, a move that was blocked by Illinois state law. Mr. **Hansberry** took the case all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, where he won *Hansberry v. Lee* in 1940, while his wife guarded their home against white violence. **Hansberry** wrote about a similar situation in *Raisin in the Sun*. Her father suffered enormously from his action. Five years later, he died of a cerebral hemorrhage in Mexico.

**Hansberry** attended college for two years at the University of Wisconsin, then moved to New York and worked at a variety of jobs. She met and married Robert Nemiroff, and began to write short stories, poems, and plays, culminating in a full year devoted to writing *Raisin*. The play won instantaneous success, and it was eventually made into a movie.

**Hansberry** continued to write, despite her now frequent bouts with cancer. After her death in 1965, Nemiroff compiled and edited her autobiographical writings in *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1969), which itself became a play. **Hansberry**'s last play, *Les Blancs* (published in *Les Blancs: The Last Plays of Lorraine Hansberry*, New York: Random House, 1972), opened at the Longacre Theater in 1970 to a short run.

**Hansberry**'s work was the subject of much criticism during the Black Nationalist period of the 1960s and 1970s. Many called her work "assimilationist" and accused her of being old-fashioned. Later critics, however, praised her contributions to the American realist tradition, noting her commitment to the African heritage of black Americans, and acknowledged the depth of her inspiration to later authors. Only 34 years old, and at the beginning of her career, **Hansberry** died on January 12, 1965.

Author of the prize-winning drama *A Raisin in the Sun*, Lorraine Vivian **Hansberry** was the first black woman ever to have a play produced on Broadway and the winner of the New York Drama Critics Circle Award for best play of the 1958–59 season. She was the first black, the fifth woman, and the youngest person ever to win the award. The drama focuses on an African-American family that is attempting to move into an all-white neighborhood. In writing the play, **Hansberry** drew on personal experience. When she was eight, her family had attempted to do the same thing in Chicago. They were threatened and then evicted under a court order. Though the decision was finally overturned in 1940 by the U.S. Supreme Court, the struggle had taken a toll physically and psychologically, as well as financially, and **Hansberry**'s father died five years later.

In spite of the obvious emotional appeal of *A Raisin in the Sun*, the fact that **Hansberry** was an unknown African-American woman made it difficult to get producers to even read her work. There was also concern that there would be no audience for a serious, black-oriented play. So **Hansberry** decided to raise the \$100,000 needed to produce the play herself. In the end, more people invested in *Raisin* than in any previous Broadway production. The show ran for 19 months on Broadway and was made into an award-winning movie starring Sidney Poitier. It was translated into 30 languages, and a 1974 musical version won a Tony Award.

In 1964, **Hansberry**'s second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened. That same year she wrote the text for *The Movement*, a collection of photographs documenting the Civil Rights movement. By this time, Lorraine **Hansberry** was seriously

ill with cancer. After her death, autobiographical information taken from her stories, letters, and other writings was incorporated into a play called *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*.

## References and Further Information

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