"White Fear" and the Studio System: A Re-evaluation of Hansberry's Original Screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun*

Since the "unfilmed original screenplay" of *A Raisin in the Sun* was first published in 1992, a storm of controversy has arisen over the changes between Lorraine Hansberry's original screenplay and the final, filmed screenplay. That Hansberry's screenplay was bowdlerized out of racist concerns is now left unquestioned, and no one has yet scrutinized these assumptions in order to test their validity. Even as recently as 2004, Lisbeth Lipari's article, "'Fearful of the Written Word': White Fear, Black Writing, and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* Screenplay," appeared in *Quarterly Journal of Speech.* Lipari's work is only the most recent, scholarly judgment that maintains the status quo consensus on this issue. Her goal was to "trace the metamorphosis of whiteness through its journey from Hansberry's original 1959 screenplay to its transformation into the 1961 film mediated by Columbia Pictures' Hollywood production and marketing machine" (82).

Were the modifications to Hansberry's original screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun* indeed a product of "white fear," or were the alterations made by the studio the norm for stage-to-screen adaptations of that era?

It should be noted that despite any changes, Hansberry received sole screenplay credit; no one has ever claimed status as an uncredited writer or collaborator. I shall first look at the changes Hansberry made when she adapted the screenplay from her play before moving on to the cuts the studio made before the film's release. By the end of this paper, I intend to answer the central question as to whether racist fear indeed victimized the original screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun.*

Enormously successful on Broadway, *A Raisin in the Sun* ran for nineteen months and won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, making Hansberry the youngest American and the first Black to do so (Hill and Hatch 376). The play revolves around the Younger family, including Lena, her daughter Beneatha, and

son Walter, along with Walter's wife (Ruth) and son (Travis). The action of the play begins the day before the Youngers will receive a $10,000 check, complements of the deceased elder Younger. Beneatha dreams of attending medical school. Walter, on the other hand, hopes to own a liquor store. Ruth just wants out of their small apartment. Lena surprises everyone by putting a down payment on a house in a white neighborhood, still planning to use the rest of the money for Beneatha's tuition at Walter's discretion. Instead of putting the rest of the money in the bank, Walter unwisely invests it in a business venture. One of Walter's partners takes the money and runs; the family's dejection after this news serves as the play's climax. The play ends on a happy note, however, as Lena decides that the family should still move, despite the many financial and racial obstacles they will confront.

Despite *A Raisin in the Sun*'s place as the only film script by Hansberry, she wrote much about film and its treatment of African Americans. In an unpublished essay from 1951, Hansberry reiterated her desire for a more realistic depiction from Hollywood of Black America, "our sorrow, songs and laughter, to our blues and our poetry" (Hansberry xliii).

Hansberry sought to enhance the scope of the play "[sending] the formerly housebound characters hither and yon into the city" (Hansberry, *A Raisin* xxix). Negative criticism from some in the black community, who considered her play too bourgeois (Lipari 86-87), also possibly fueled her decision to enhance her script. Hansberry subsequently added many scenes, some to show what the average day entails for her characters, others in an attempt to give them more depth. The majority of the new scenes were added to the first act, seemingly Hansberry's method to make viewers even more sympathetic to her characters, before the heightened drama of the next two acts.

As in her stageplay, Hansberry gives particular attention to the set design of the apartment in the screenplay. The set remains roughly the same, but Hansberry adds some comments to explain the situation the Youngers find themselves in:

> This is the ghetto of Chicago. [...] Not indolence, not indifference, and certainly not the lack of ambition imprisons them, but various enormous questions of the social organization around them which they understand in part, but only in part. (5)

Lipari considers Hansberry's direction as "posing its critique of whiteness through suggestion and indirection rather than explicit statement and by using the camera rather than dialogue or voiceover to prompt recognition of the imposing presence of whiteness on this family" (87).

New scenes in the original screenplay show the Youngers at their daily jobs. Lena is taking care of Mrs. Holiday's daughter, while informing Mrs. Holiday that it would be her last day. The scene is rather lengthy, with extensive speeches by Lena about her work history and philosophy and her desire for Walter to find something more meaningful in his work. Margaret B. Wilkerson notes the significance of this scene in the introduction to the published screenplay: "When Mrs. Holiday questions by mere tone of voice whether Lena can really say good-bye to the child—*suggesting in that moment the historic myth that mammies surely prefer their white charges over their own families*—Lena curtly affirms that the good-bye is indeed a final one" (Hansberry, *A Raisin* xxxvi; emphasis added). Wilkerson may be correct in her assessment, but the scene offers little in terms of character development. Hansberry also includes a brief scene with Walter at the mansion of his boss. Frustrated with his occupation as a chauffeur, Walter is unable to relate to another of his trade. In her screenplay, Hansberry also moves Beneatha's first scene with Asagai to a campus lounge. Of these, only the brief scene with Walter made it into the film, though sans the encounter with the other chauffeur.

The focus then shifts back to Walter, as he visits a liquor store to speak with Herman, the white owner. He informs Herman of his plans to own a liquor store, but Herman discourages him, expressing envy of Walter's "nice nine-to-five job" (61). Walter however does not heed Herman's concern responding, with possible sarcasm, "How big it is of you to want to keep me out of misery" (63).

Perhaps the most interesting of the early supplementary scenes concerns Lena buying apples in a grocery store in her neighborhood. When the white clerk gives her inferior apples at an exorbitant price, she fumes over the discrepancy between these products and the produce available "over yonder where I work" (53-54). Frustrated, Lena takes a streetcar to the famous "open markets" in the far Southside, a Chicago landmark (56).

After Walter's dejection over his mother's decision to buy the home in Clybourne Park, Hansberry includes a montage scene of Walter driving around Chicago. As time passes, Walter stumbles upon a sidewalk speaker delivering a stirring, racially charged address. Coincidentally, Asagai is also there, although he and Walter still do

not know each other. Walter walks around some more and comes across Beneatha's other boyfriend, George, who offers Walter a lift home. Although the speaker on the street makes some valid points, he says nothing new (as Hansberry admits herself in her description of the sequence), and the new scene retards the screenplay's pacing. The montage of Walter driving, however, was filmed.

Hansberry places the scene when Lena receives her gifts (garden tools and ostentatious hat) in the backyard of their future house. This scene offers perhaps Hansberry's strongest social commentary, as she depicts their novel, yet still uncomfortable, surroundings in the stage directions:

> It is to them a lovely house: rather more handsome than they had permitted themselves to dream. [...] Each face regards it with its own reaction of disbelief. These are people who are primarily accustomed to disappointment. (150)

The film retained this scene. The Youngers arrive by taxi (noticeably driven by a *white* taxi driver who refers to Walter as "Sir") to their new home and the audience marvels with the family as they tour their future abode.

Hansberry offers a chilly description of the reaction of the Youngers' future neighbors:

> The camera roams at medium close over the surrounding houses [...] where rather ordinary types and varieties of Americans live; but at the moment something sinister clings to them. At some windows curtains drop back quickly into place. [...] The faces—the eyes of women and children, in the main—look hard with a curiosity that, for the most part, is clearly hostile. (155)

With such writing, Hansberry captures the essence of what it means to have a "dream deferred," as Langston Hughes eloquently phrased it in the poem from which the play acquired its title.

One should also note themes, characters, and scenes that Hansberry *did not* expand upon or include in her screenplay. Despite her Pan-Africanism and belief that changes for Blacks in Africa could also lead to changes for Blacks in America (Carter 47), she developed Asagai's character no further. She also omits the scenes included in the expanded text of the play, scenes written before the play was on Broadway but deleted for the sake of playing time (see Wilkerson). (Some of Asagai and Beneatha's expanded conversation in Act III did make the film.) Although these scenes were utilized in the play's twenty-fifth-anniversary revival and now serve as a curious novelty for fans and scholars of *A Raisin in the Sun*, they pale in comparison to what did make it into the play, and have subsequently fallen out of favor with audiences and critics.

Overall a marvel, Hansberry's screenplay ably bears comparison with the best screenplays adapted from previous material. Spike Lee was so impressed after reading the original screenplay that he now considers Hansberry an icon in African-American cinema as well, her name worthy of consideration along with Oscar Micheaux, Ossie Davis, Gordon Parks, and Melvin Van Peebles (Hansberry, *A Raisin* xlvi). However, the strength of her screenplay lies not in the new scenes (which

offer little in the way of a "more radical critique of whiteness," contra Lipari), but rather in her direction. Hansberry's screenplay delights in its readability and flow; one can envision the film in the mind while reading it. I do not argue that Hansberry was an "establishment artist"; her other writings, not to mention the surveillance conducted by the FBI for her promotion of socialism, prove that she was anything but (Carter 39). Still, little evidence supports the notion that Hansberry's screenplay is any more sweeping in its condemnation of entrenched racism and capitalism than the play that first gave voice to these dissents. As Lipari herself admits, new dialogue about race is kept to a minimum, but the *mise-en-scène* and cinematography suggested in the script reflects Hansberry's scathing critique of racism and capitalism. Lipari forgets, however, that this is Hollywood—rarely will writers see their screenplays, as envisioned, on the screen. Rather than blame the studio executives, perhaps more criticism should be aimed at director Daniel Petrie.

With the screenplay complete, production for the film began 6 July 1960 and ended September 7. Most of the cast from the original stage production reprised their roles in the film, including Sidney Poitier as Walter, Claudia McNeil as Lena, Ruby Dee playing Ruth, Diana Sands as Beneatha, Ivan Dixon as Asagai, John Fiedler in the role of Linder, and Louis Gossett, Jr., as George Murchison. Stage producer Phillip Rose served in the same capacity for the film, along with David Susskind. As mentioned above, Petrie was chosen as director. At that time, he had only done television work and one feature, *The Bramble Bush*, released in 1960.

Cuts to Hansberry's screenplay occurred in both pre-production (cut from the screenplay before filming) and post-production (filmed, but cut while editing). Regrettably, we do not know which category all the expunged scenes fall under, but the memoranda reveal a few answers. For example, the scene involving Lena at her employer's was cut in its entirety with suitable rationale from Sam Briskin, Columbia Pictures Vice President of Production: "It was agreed that [these pages] stopped the flow of the story, introduce a character—Mrs. Holiday—whom we never see again, and in general contain unnecessary exposition" (Lipari 92). Lena's shopping experience was also cut, but the film retained Hansberry's new lines for Lena pertaining to her distaste for supermarkets. Perhaps the filmmakers operated under this mindset: given the wealth of wonderful characters in Hansberry's play, if certain new scenes did not develop the characters further, or even amplify the tension, why include them?

Unfortunately, little is known about Hansberry's opinion about the cuts made. Even in her "informal autobiography," *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, adapted by her husband and notable producer in African-American theatre, Robert Nemiroff, Hansberry fails to mention the film, favorably or otherwise. Nemiroff worked hard

to also get Hansberry's original screenplay published. He died, however, months before its release. Needless to say, Nemiroff had unique insight into Hansberry's work:

> The Hansberry screenplay is [...] vastly different from the 1961 movie, which was essentially the stageplay with minor "openings out." At least forty percent of the text (not counting smaller variations within speeches—there are hundreds of these) is brand new, containing what all who've read it recently recognize as some of her finest [...] writing [...] While retaining the primary scenes, themes, and dialogue of the play, therefore, she sought to capture through the camera what the stageplay could only talk about: *the full reality of the ghetto experience.* (Hansberry, *A Raisin* xvii; emphasis added)

So why were the cuts made? First of all, Nemiroff's estimate that forty percent of the text is new seems rather high; a close reading of both the screenplay and stageplay reveals that an estimate of twenty to thirty percent would be more accurate. Lipari places the blame on the Columbia studio executives who had most of the control over the film (90). Wilkerson maintains that Vice President Briskin's editorial notes, speaking on behalf of "the movie studios who were incredibly cautious about offending the American (i.e., white) public" catalyzed the cuts (Hansberry, *A Raisin* xxxvi-xxxvii). Lipari makes much of the memoranda over *A Raisin in the Sun* that passed between studio executives. She particularly criticizes Columbia Pictures Corporation executive Arthur Kramer's memo to Susskind:

> In general, David, I am fearful of the written word, as opposed to a vis-à-vis conversation. I am fearful because notes expressed on paper seem so much colder and more remote than those expressed verbally. I should like you to remember while reading these notes the strong affirmative reaction we all had after reading the first draft screenplay. That reaction, as you recall, was that the author did a remarkable job of transferring a wonderful play to the screenplay medium. [...] this is particularly impressive when one considers the author has never before written a screenplay. (Lipari 90)

It is the phrase "fearful of the written word" that Lipari takes to task, finding that it "unintentionally evokes a long tradition of white fear of black writing" (82). Lipari argues that the studio missed an "opportunity to contest the Hollywood images of whiteness associated with goodness, universality, and innocence" (83) with the changes to the original screenplay.

The changes to Hansberry's screenplay resulted in a film closer to her original play. The film was received with somewhat mixed reviews, often divided over its "staginess." Arthur Knight of the *Saturday Review* said that the film transcends the "limitations of its single set and three-act construction" through the direction. Notable *New York Times* critic Bosley Crowther admitted that the film was "stage-like," but admired how Hansberry's play had been "turned into an equally fine screen drama." Phillip T. Hartung (*Commonweal*) declared the film "rather static [...] relying greatly on close-ups and dialogue." Anonymous reviewers in *Newsweek*

and *Life* were much harsher, as they argued that the action is too confined to call it a "real movie" and is "too tightly limited to theater dimensions."[1] In the end, however, *A Raisin in the Sun* was a success, garnering BAFTA Award and Golden Globe nominations for Poitier and McNeil, while Petrie acquired a Directors Guild of America nomination, and Dee won "Best Supporting Actress" by the National Board of Review. Hansberry also did not go overlooked, her screenplay nominated by the Writers Guild of America for "Best Written American Drama." The film was also honored at Cannes, where it won the Gary Cooper Award for "human values" and Petrie was nominated for the coveted Palm d'Or.

A Raisin in the Sun was released when stage-to-screen adaptations may have been at their height, and a comparison to these other films should be made. Both *Inherit the Wind* (1960, based on a play by Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee, film directed by Stanley Kramer) and *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1962, a Eugene O'Neill play, directed by Sidney Lumet) pleased audiences and critics, as did *12 Angry Men* (1957, adapted from a teleplay, again by Sidney Lumet). Nor was *A Raisin in the Sun* the first major film based on a black play; United Artists released *Take a Giant Step* (Leacock, 1959) two years previous, and the film received two Golden Globe nominations, despite its failure at the box office.

Although *Inherit the Wind* contains some exterior scenes, *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is distinctively stage-bound. *12 Angry Men*, released four years prior, was a hit despite all of the film's action in the small jury room, save for a scant three minutes. One might reasonably conclude that the producers of *A Raisin in the Sun* saw little need to retain all of Hansberry's new exterior shots. A precedent had already been set for feature films that remained close to the plays from which they originated and were perhaps a bit stagy in the way they were filmed. Likewise, studio executives saw little need in tampering with Hansberry's play, a conventional, but unsurprising choice, given the notoriously conservative nature of studios of the era, who often operated with the principle "if it ain't broke, don't fix it." In remaining close to the play, they went so far as to keep the entire principal Broadway cast (save the role of Travis, whose age necessitated a new young actor).

Spike Lee, who contributed a commentary to the published screenplay, also believes that Hansberry's original screenplay was censored: "It seems to me all the cuts had to deal with softening a too defiant black voice" (Hansberry, *A Raisin* xlvi). Lee points out, "Of course, Columbia probably cited length as the reason for the deletions. But I feel Lorraine was right in her vision to 'open up' the play [...] *She wanted to make it cinematic, to make it a film.* In the final result, the film is very stagey" (Hansberry, *A Raisin* xlvi; emphasis in original). Despite Lee's opinion, *A Raisin in the Sun*'s length should be considered. The film runs 128 minutes, over thirty minutes longer than the average feature of that era. Indeed, Hansberry herself gave length as the reason for the cuts (Lipari 96). Hansberry's envisioned film may have been more potent and emotive in its depiction of racism in Chicago, but shorter films make safer investments: the shorter the film, the more showings in a day. It would not have been the first time that Hollywood favored profits over art; one recalls the decision to release a truncated (and disastrous) *Cleopatra* (Mankiewicz, 1963) rather than in two three-hour parts.

Lipari, Lee, and others criticize the film as if it were completely emasculated; a close viewing of the film reveals quite the opposite. Much race language from the play/screenplay made the transition to the film: Walter's statement about how "rich white people live"; Lena advising Ruth to call in sick with the flu, since it "sounds so respectable" to white people; Lena's statement about knowing she never was a "rich white woman"; all of Walter's talk about how black men and women are; both Linder scenes preserved *en toto*; and Walter's plea to the "Great White Father [...] we's ain't gwine cum out deh and dirty up yo's white folks' neighborhood." In addition, the words "faggoty" and "crackers" are each used twice, fairly offensive vocabulary at that time. Although Lipari refers to the "studio's erasures of so-called 'race issues,'" (91) the film obviously preserves a significant black voice.

The notion of "white fear" (at least in this instance) is further invalidated when considering the abortion issue, a topic far more controversial at that time than any racial issues Hansberry brings up in her original screenplay. Columbia chose not to censor the scenes dealing with abortion, something they could have done easily. Why then would they consider a realistic portrayal of Chicago's black neighborhoods more controversial than abortion? This makes little sense, and those who have raised their ire over the changes to Hansberry's screenplay fail to notice this.

The Columbia executives receive little credit from those critical of their editing decisions. What about their decision to finance the picture? In a *New York Times* interview (17 July 1960) a Columbia spokesman stated, "Frankly, [*A Raisin in the Sun*] is a risky project for the studio. Columbia decided to gamble on it because they felt it had a chance to be a great picture" (*Raisin* DVD). Thankfully, Columbia did finance *A Raisin in the Sun*, the first great black film of the 1960s and proof that black films could reach large audiences.

Unfortunately, we will never know what motivated Columbia's decision to edit *A Raisin in the Sun* to its final form, barely different from its stage form. Racism has become a simple scapegoat for the action the studio took. This author realizes the dangers in questioning the established opinion on the subject, but various factors must also be considered. To take the effortless course and assume "white fear" was the determining factor appears simplistic given the milieu in which the film *A Raisin in the Sun* was created. Critics of the film, ignoring 1961 post-McCarthyism Hollywood, impose the Hollywood of Stepin Fetchit, Mammy, and Prissy on this era.

Screenplays were often added or deleted to while filming, and Hansberry's screenplay (though brilliant) was no exception. No doubt length was a concern as it has always been, and scenes deemed unnecessary were deleted. Perhaps audiences would have responded favorably to a longer film; if so, this makes studio executives guilty of nothing more than ignorance. Although "white fear" (as articulated by

Lipari) has existed in Hollywood, little suggests its involvement in the making of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Columbia executives admired Hansberry's play and attempted to remain true to her vision as much as possible. Also, critics who think Petrie and others dismissed Hansberry's screenplay entirely should watch the film again and take note of the new scenes and lines that were included (three scenes in the Kitty Kat Klub, including a new conversation among Walter, Willie, and Bobo, in addition to the aforementioned scenes). Lipari's view of *A Raisin in the Sun* as a production that "paradoxically contests, succumbs to, and perpetuates the demands of structural racism," (90-91) has here been refuted.

Finally then, *A Raisin in the Sun* stands as the greatest African-American play of the twentieth century, as well as one of the greatest American dramas, period. Black theatre historian James V. Hatch says, "*A Raisin in the Sun* confronted Whites for an acknowledgement that a black family could be fully human, 'just like us'" (Hill and Hatch 370). The universal themes in *A Raisin in the Sun* helped it cross all racial, class, age, and ethnic boundaries, while still fitting W. E. B. DuBois's criteria for Negro theatre as being "by, for, about, and near [Negroes]." Furthermore, the film paved the way for future films, such as the films of 1963-1964 (*Nothing But a Man* [Roemer, 1964], *One Potato Two Potato* [Peerce, 1964], *The Cool World* [Clarke, 1964]) that took Blacks seriously (see Johnson). In *A Raisin in the Sun*, Blacks had a film truly their own, a film of which to be proud and that still holds up well 45 years later (quite unlike the black-cast musicals *The Green Pastures* [Connelly and Keighley, 1936], *Cabin in the Sky* [Minnelli, 1943], and *Carmen Jones* [Preminger, 1954] that perpetuated long-held African-American stereotypes). Those that have examined the controversy over Hansberry's original screenplay of *A Raisin in the Sun* have done us a great service; still, we must always separate the rational arguments from those influenced by imprudent blameworthiness on white racism and fear.

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Author's Note

After its Sundance premiere, a new version of *A Raisin in the Sun* was broadcast 25 Feb. 2008 on ABC. Similar to the original version, most of the cast from the recent Broadway revival starred, including Phylicia Rashad as Lena, Sean Combs as Walter, Audra McDonald as Ruth, and Sanaa Lathan as Beneatha. Director Kenny Leon also brought his own new vision of the play to the small screen. Screenwriter Paris Qualles's new version is a freer interpretation, even adding numerous scenes to Hansberry's play (and original screenplay), most notably two visits to the abortionist. (Ruth's decision *not* to go with the abortion is made more explicit, perhaps to pacify a more conservative audience.) This lengthier version (131 minutes) may be the result of two phenomena: continued longer running times for the average film, and most likely, the three-hour slot allotted for movies shown in prime time today. Though the 2008 version is subsequently less stagy than the 1961 film version, some of the performances are not as strong, leaving some critics to compare the new version unfavorably. Still, the film earned three Emmy nominations, including Outstanding Made for Television Movie, as well as a similar Golden Globe nomination, despite its artistic paucity in comparison to the original film version. This newer version seems only to justify my thesis that the studio made the right decision to go with a shorter and more faithful adaptation.

Note

[1] All reviews mentioned in this paragraph are from Richard M. Leeson's *Lorraine Hansberry: A Research and Production Sourcebook*, 105-07.

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*I am also indebted to the "source of all sources," the Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com).