

Written by Mike Schulz
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Area performer and radio-show host Shellie Moore Guy is slender in frame, and not particularly tall. Yet in the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's presentation of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, the actress -- in her role as matriarch Lena Younger -- projects such expansive love, pride, and strength of character that she appears larger than life. Lena's adult children, Walter Lee (Curtis Lewis) and Beneatha (Alysha McElroy-Hodges), may tower over her, but there's never any doubt that Guy's selfless, resolutely devout mother is the one in charge; she guides both her family and Hansberry's drama with an impassioned righteousness that would be mythic if it weren't so complexly structured, and so wonderfully human.

This doesn't mean, however, that Guy's magical performance overshadows those of Lewis and McElroy-Hodges, just as it doesn't overshadow the portrayal of Shanna Nicole Cramer, who plays Lena's daughter-in-law, Ruth. Instead, director Fred Harris Jr. and his central acting quartet have created a wholly believable family, one in which the command and focus are forever shifting, yet the moral center is never in doubt. The cast's unremitting honesty, naturalism, and infectious good humor lend the show a truthfulness and vigor to match Hansberry's, and by the production's finale, you feel simultaneously wiped out and elated, the way you do when you finally reach the end of a sweeping, epic novel. This *Raisin in the Sun* is better than fine; it's downright exhilarating.

Dream Weavers: "A Raisin in the Sun," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through July 19

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There's exhilaration, too, in seeing so many fresh, madly talented performers making their debuts on the Playcrafters stage, and in such a worthy vehicle, to boot. Set in the south side of Chicago in the early 1950s, Hansberry's piece opens with the African-American Younger family preparing for the next day's arrival of a \$10,000 check, the long-awaited insurance money bequeathed to them by Lena's late husband. For Lena, the money will enable her family to trade their cramped urban apartment for a more spacious home in a suburban neighborhood. For college student and budding activist Beneatha, it offers the chance to enroll in medical school. For the hard-working, newly pregnant Ruth, it provides some relief from a life of domestic service. And for Ruth's husband, Walter Lee, it represents an investment opportunity, one that would allow him to quit his job as a chauffeur and co-fund a chain of local liquor stores. (Ruth and Walter Lee also have a young son, played here by the adorable and relaxed Xavier Marshall, for whom the prospect of new fortune is as thrilling as a personal visit from Santa.)



Like all of the greatest American plays, *A Raisin in the Sun* is principally about dreams -- having them, losing them, and finding the courage to dream a *new*

dream -- and it's so beautifully written and detailed that even Hansberry's stage directions have the power to make you cry. Yet nothing about Harris' fluid, generous direction suggests that his production is running on autopilot. Knowing exactly when to employ overlapping dialogue and moments of exquisite, protracted silence, he's keenly perceptive about the tricky tug-of-war that families frequently engage in; the Youngers advance, attack, and retreat in ways that only close relations do, especially those living in too-close quarters for too long a time. Harris' show is marvelously well-paced -- at 160 minutes, there's barely a dull scene in it -- and even when the action consists of nothing more than two characters talking at the kitchen table, the superb actors ensure that

Raisin

is perpetually exciting.

"Exciting," though, barely begins to describe Lewis' portrayal. I'll be honest: I don't remember the actor from his role as "3rd Officer" in last summer's Genesis Guild presentation of *Comedy of Errors*

. Now, I can't imagine ever forgetting him. Speaking with ardent fervor and moving with an intensely robust physical assurance -- he seems to be walking, or perhaps dancing, on springs -- Lewis' entire soul appears invested in Walter Lee's eternal search for a better life, and his readings are continually, magnificently unpredictable. Lewis is so funny and moving and electric that he could easily steamroll his co-stars if they gave him the opportunity.

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They don't. The serene, resplendently naturalistic Cramer offers a pitch-perfect exploration of a woman too sensible, and too tired, to put up with foolishness, and when Ruth is overcome with joy, the actress seems lit from within. Getting audiences to well up during a tragic moment is one thing, but Cramer accomplishes that feat here with one jubilant exclamation of "Hallelujah!", and her reflexive squeal of happiness when Walter Lee presented Ruth with a flower was Friday night's sweetest grace note.



And as far as McElroy-Hodges is concerned, I'm beyond astonished that her 22-year-old character is actually being played by a 14-year-old girl. (She's about to enter her freshman year at Rock Island High School.) This young actress is already so mature and skillful -- and such a preternaturally gifted comedienne -- that the mind boggles at what McElroy-Hodges might offer in future productions; her Beneatha is radiantly polished and forceful, and effortlessly endearing.

Taken with Guy's steadfast, heartrending, and oftentimes lightly comic portrayal, this Younger family makes for a truly divine ensemble, one complemented by a series of excellent character turns: Paul D. McCaw as Beneatha's prickly college beau; Amos Lumumba Johnson Sr. -- alternating performances with Curtis Wyatt -- as a kind-hearted Nigerian suitor; Paul-Richard Pierre as an understandably shaken investor; Paul Workman as a "friendly" bigot who tries to coerce the Youngers (whom he refers to as "you people") into not moving. *A Raisin in the Sun* is a thorough delight, and it was inspiring as hell to see its opening-night performance rewarded with such an enthusiastic standing ovation from the most racially-mixed crowd I've yet seen at a local production. Great theatre, of course, doesn't know from race, and here's hoping that Playcrafters' latest is just the beginning in an area-wide theatrical upsurge that's long overdue.

For tickets and information, call (309)762-0330 or visit Playcrafters.com.