

TV Close-Up: Phylicia Rashad

by Eirik_Knutzen

"A Raisin in the Sun" by playwright Lorraine Hansberry - a sensational, instant American classic dealing with the humanity and dignity of mankind - made history the moment it premiered on Broadway in 1959. Among many milestones, the spirited work became the first stage presentation written by a black woman to be produced on the Great White Way.

PHYLICIA RASHAD - Phylicia Rashad will soon play Lena Younger in a revival of the much-acclaimed play 'A Raisin in the Sun.' CNS Photo courtesy of ABC. The sensitive yet powerful story of a family drifting from poverty in the Deep South to an uncertain future on Chicago's tough South Side in a quest for a piece of the American dream inspired generations of blacks as well as countless multiethnic groups hovering near the bottom of the country's socio-economic scale.

As the stage production's intent and content raced through intellectual circles from coast to coast, "A Raisin in the Sun" made genuine stars of Claudia McNeil (Mama/Lena Younger), Sidney Poitier (Walter Lee Younger Jr.), Ruby Dee (Ruth Younger) and Diana Sands (Beneatha Younger). Two years later, the principals of the original cast in the prize-winning drama became bona fide movie stars in the screen version directed by Daniel Petrie. The screenplay never lost its punch: Lena, the strong, principled and wise matriarch who decides the fate of her family by dispersing the \$10,000 she inherited from her late husband, still remains in full control.

And that's how Phylicia Rashad - best known as the smart attorney and loving mother on "The Cosby Show" - chose to present her take on Lena when she accepted the four-month run of "A Raisin in the Sun's" Broadway revival in 2004 alongside Sean (P. Diddy, Puff Daddy, etc.) Combs as the ne'er-do-well Walter Lee Jr., Audra McDonald as his sympathetic wife, Ruth, and Sanaa Lathan as Beneatha, his cute, self-centered sister dreaming of attending medical school.

Rashad promptly earned the Best Actress Tony Award for "Raisin" (the first black actress to win a Tony in this category), as Audra McDonald won the Tony for Best Featured Actress and Sanaa Lathan was nominated in the same category. All the headliners were raring to go in the three-hour telefilm version of the play when their original director, Kenny Leon, signed on for the prestigious project.

Very familiar with the "Raisin" play and feature film from family discussions when she was a child, Rashad, 59, didn't look far when she sought inspiration for her Lena Younger character.

"According to the playwright, she was a woman born in Mississippi in 1904, then migrated north with her husband to Chicago looking for life that didn't necessarily exist," she explained. "Ultimately, she became a domestic for a white family.

"Intelligent and strong - mentally and physically - Mama Lena's family were the most important thing in her life," Rashad continued. "Wise, she knew everything about staying safe and alive. She grew up learning to plant and harvest food, milk cows, churn butter, make clothes, mend clothes and wash clothes. First and foremost, her life revolves around how to take care of the people you love. So I started forming the character by looking at the older women in my family."

More than a dozen women on both sides of her family served as strong role models while she was growing up in Houston with her Cherokee Indian mother (Pulitzer Prize-nominated poet and scholar Vivian Ayers), her father (highly respected dentist Andrew Arthur Allen), her sister (famous actress/choreographer/director Debbie Allen) and two brothers (a jazz musician and an investment banker).

"I love and respect them all," said Rashad, "but my memories always include Mama Goldie, my paternal grandmother who loved children. My father was one of her 10 children born on a Louisiana farm - on the back porch under an orange tree. Mama Bessie, my maternal grandmother, was a high school principal; a very strong woman, very direct in her speech and very keen in her perceptions.

"And then there was my Great Aunt Fannie, an absolute genius with home remedies who knew all about making poultices for every ailment; she could cure almost anything with her knowledge of herbs, tree barks and plants. Aunt Bessie was a professor of mathematics at Winthrop College and a state congresswoman in South Carolina. The men in my family were just as impressive.

"My paternal grandfather was a hard-working fireman on the Southern Pacific Railroad; my maternal grandfather was a tough, tough blacksmith. His father owned a barbershop and a funeral parlor. No formal education didn't mean no intelligence. Some of the formally educated are the biggest darn fools ever."

Rashad graduated easily from her father's alma mater, Howard University, but her acting career occasionally stalled along the way due to three marriages and three divorces. But she says that nothing, including two grown children, will keep her from the next project: an all-black production of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" directed by her sister opening March 6 on Broadway at the Broadhurst Theater.

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