

ASTONISH ME!

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First Nights That Changed the World

DOMINIC DROMGOOLE

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*For Siofra, Grainne and Cara,
with all my love*

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Introduction

ASTONISH ME!

In the film *Shakespeare in Love*, its writer, Tom Stoppard, presents an abiding truth about human endeavour, and a particular one for the arts. It is always darkest before the dawn. It is only when the barriers are mountainous, the impossibilities annihilating, and the spirit broken, only when all hope has gone, that the miraculous occurs. The essence is gathered into a short scene and a pungent phrase. Fennyman, an aggrieved investor, has cornered Henslowe, the manager of the Rose Theatre, and is demanding when he will see a return on his investment. Henslowe rattles out his explanation:

'Let me explain to you about the theatre. The natural condition is one of insurmountable obstacles on the road to imminent disaster.'

'What do we do?' quizzes Fennyman.

'Nothing. Strangely enough it all turns out well.'

'How?'

'I don't know. It's a mystery.'

The final phrase makes all sorts of sense to anyone who has worked in any form of cultural endeavour, and has been astonished by how phoenixes, small and large, can arise from the ashes of burnt dreams. At the instant that all seems lost, words can be spoken, paint daubed or music played, and everything starts to make new sense. From the midst of panic and confusion, thoughts, tunes or feelings previously felt but

unexpressed find a new voice. The skies start to clear. In the instant of its first expression, both the artists involved and those who give witness feel the air shift.

This book focuses, chapter by chapter, on a series of seismic first nights, ranging across different public art forms, across history and the globe. It is a celebration of the artistic achievements that overcame the odds to change the story of culture, and whose effects rippled out to change the world. Our opinions can be swayed by politicians, our understanding can be refreshed by philosophers, but, for our perception of the world and each other to be realigned, nothing can touch art.

The more we look into the origins of our artistic impulse, the more we see its public nature. Early theories that rock art was the expression of lonely primitive artists wandering away from the tribe to record inner feelings have given way to collaborative understandings. These spaces were used for shamanistic hoolies. Groups came together with music and dance, working in response to the art on the walls, to celebrate life, to summon spirits and to effect soul-swerves in the participants. The etched bison, the stencilled hands, the scratched boards, the horses in flight ghosting round the walls, were all part of a wider work which included bodies morphing in and out of smoke and firelight, with music driving the shindig along from horns, pipes and whirring strings. Acousticians have discovered that images are clustered at points of maximum resonance within the caves, where music could be amplified, as it later would be by the vaults of cathedrals.

Wagner coined the term *Gesamtkunstwerk* to describe the ‘total work of art’ he aspired to. For him it meant a synthesis of music, image, lighting and performance in the immersive experiences he desired. In this he believed himself an original. In fact he was within an old and unceasing tradition. Each of the events in this book creates an aura which envelops not only the elements of presentation, but brings into the circle the buildings that house them, and those who give witness. The earliest cave rituals – the painted bodies, their expressive movement, the art and the music – were *Gesamtkunstwerk*. When Thespis broke free from the chorus in the theatre of Dionysia, he was part of a unity which included the theatre, the Acropolis behind, and the sun-drenched hills in the distance. When a group of Parisian snobs crowded into a room

in the Salon des Refusés to bark with laughter at Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, they were part of a pattern of confrontation and reaction which defined the total work. When Fela Kuti danced, prophesied and sacrificed at his Shrine in Lagos, he and the crowd pushing through to dawn were part of a single dynamic entity.

An exhibition of iconoclastic art like *Sensation*, Stravinsky's ballet *The Rite of Spring*, the unveiling of a sculpture as bold as Michelangelo's *David* – all are accelerated in their subversion of the collective reality of their era by the presence of a crowd. The public bring shared time with them to an event, the scars and prejudices of history and the present. They also bring a future. A crowd can be an ugly or a static beast; it can also be wise and optimistic. Populism is much besmirched, but in its capacity for a jump towards something brighter, it can startle. The mob is often more tolerant, more radical and more progressive than the academy or the elite. All artists want to share their new reality, and the presence of a throng helps usher that along.

Each of these extraordinary events involved a vibrant dynamic between artist and audience. Scuzzy venues were crammed for the Sex Pistols, theatres packed for Oscar Wilde and Tennessee Williams, exhibition spaces crushed with people for Damien Hirst, festival fields overflowed for Ravi Shankar, queues reached around the block for Hitchcock's *Psycho*. Each artist knew how to create a story to pull in the punters. Whether Japan in the seventeenth century, or Lagos in the 1970s, a work of art is not itself alone, it is an aggregate of the attention of those looking.

Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* is both the work itself and an accumulated impression within those who love the work. An experiment like *L'Orfeo* – a work which invented opera as a form – needs permission to exist. Just as we collaborate to invent fictions like money and religion, so new forms of art need collective assent. Miraculously, it can happen in an instant, when a group react with passion to something new. An old rhythm is disrupted by a new, and a door is opened when no-one knew the door was there.

When the isolation of lockdown eased, it felt rejuvenating to witness the glee with which we discovered afresh the joys of congregating. To be in a theatre again, to sense the palpable thrill of collective imagination,

was like discovering storytelling for the first time. To hear music and dance in a group reawakened the sickly thrill of one's first disco. To look at art beside others was to recall how we open each other's eyes wider. It took a dearth to remind us how gathering together squeezes extra life and meaning into art.

The best art is not made for audiences, it is made with them.

This is a canon based on 'and' rather than 'or'. It is absurd to exclude someone because they are a portly, bewigged Hanoverian, just as it is daft to exclude an elegant young Black woman from Texas. Beyoncé and Handel, Arthur Miller and Lorraine Hansberry – each pushed at what was possible. The intricacy of Fela Kuti's music is celebrated with the same enthusiasm as Stravinsky's. The shock value of Sarah Kane's new theatre is measured against the new aesthetics of Nefertiti. There are artists here – Okuni in seventeenth-century Japan, or Xiao Lu in modern China – who have not been given the same weight of consideration. They are here, like all the rest, because their art had a seismic effect.

I have also tried to widen the net of those who contribute. The audience has an underrated role in allowing art, but so do a pool of collaborators in making it. When writing about Manet, I try to give an impression of the role played by his greatest model, Victorine Meurent. Hitchcock's film *Psycho*, and its signature shower sequence, would never have been achieved, without the commitment and the fatalistic imagination of its star, Janet Leigh. Handel could never have had the resounding effect of his first *Messiah* without Susannah Cibber. And where would Beyoncé be without Jay-Z? In several cases – the Sex Pistols, and the Young British Artists – it is the collective who were the art, the movement the milestone.

The narrative is not chronological since there is no desire to imply progress. The episodes dance from continent to continent and back and forwards across time. Now we have so much culture available, all alive in virtual simultaneity – imagery from all epochs in graphic detail on the internet, music from all ages at the touch of a button – any idea of progress has been thrown into confusion. When we listen to Tallis in a fine recording, or study Michelangelo's *David* online, the idea that either were rungs on some upward ladder of achievement is rendered

absurd. Just as it is by time spent reading *Hamlet*, or staring upwards in the Pantheon.

Artists work within an understanding of the past, aware of their peers in the present, and enlivening the conversation for the future. Many make work in a state of flow – what the Welsh call *hwyl*. In that state they are not asserting their primacy over other artists (or not entirely); they are partaking in a simultaneity with other such actions in history. Stravinsky enjoyed the Russian folk-singing practice of overlaying different rhythms; cultural history is not dissimilar. Generations of makers fold their work into a present moment that encompasses the past, the fleeting present and the future, where all dissolve into a shining, still moment. A series of chakra points whence light illuminates the landscape. The map of those chakras is not a timeline, nor one of geography.

Courage and boldness are threads which enliven the fabric of each story. Excitement and adrenaline are stitched in alongside. Each moment of delivery is preceded by differing degrees of trauma. Fela Kuti had the Nigerian army set murderously against him; Okuni had the patriarchal rigidity of seventeenth-century Japan; Oscar Wilde, a society rigidly set against his preferred sexuality; Xiao Lu, the weight of the Chinese state. Breaking a mould is never easy. Artists know that, and somehow the audience sense the same.

When genuinely new work is being attempted, one can feel the static charge which electrifies a public space. Just as before a great party, the collective fear of failure creates a charged vacuum which everyone must respond to; so before a momentous first night, there is both emptiness and possibility. Only the bravest enter with confidence and start telling their story. To tell these tales from the past is not to celebrate conservatism and stasis, it is to celebrate revolt and disruption. Remembering these artists within their own context, rather than through the prism of our own moral codes, is the only way to see the width of the abysses they dared to leap.

Art thrives, too, on an enlargement of perspective. Beasts were drawn on walls in caves in part to understand them; animal headdresses were worn in shamanistic gatherings to see the world through their eyes.

Millenia later, Tolstoy, in *Anna Karenina*, whirls the reader from one character's standpoint to another, eliding invisibly from Anna to Levin to Vronsky to Karenin. In one's dizziness one falls from character to character, and world view to world view, until, out on a hunt, one finds oneself empathising with the grumbling of an overworked hunting dog. Through an act of centrifugal empathy, Tolstoy inveigles himself and his reader wholly into the canine perspective.

At the Bush Theatre, as a young producer, I was involved in mounting the quietly miraculous plays of Billy Roche, including one called *Belfry*. At its heart is a scene where a group of five people we have come to know and love gather for a birthday party. Played with a flitting lightness, the panicked rituals of creating the do, the quick and hysterical pleasures within it, and the identification earned for each character, whisk the audience into a state like ecstasy. The human truth comes to life, quick and transient, and we sense something beyond. When we see things from multiple perspectives, and are turned fast, we suddenly glimpse something outside each individual's viewpoint. Something clearer and more spacious. Call it truth or dharma or life, or what you will. On a nightly basis, it was there with Billy's play.

All the sensibilities collide and ignite access to something else floating alongside. Tennessee Williams articulated this idea: 'We see from the outside what we could not see within – a perception that could only occur through the detached eye of art. As if a ghost sat over the affairs of men and made a true record.' Chekhov, too – the master juggler of multiple perspectives – was always able to read the webs of reality in individual viewpoints, and to perceive the web of truth beyond.

In collaborative art, each of many perspectives are engaged. There is often a single artist at the centre, but alongside them are their subjects, their collaborators, and the audience that witnesses. At a certain point, within this divine tangle of prospects, the veil of each personality and the fog of each sensibility is whisked away by the scattering whizz of small particles of truth. Then the larger generosity of life sparkles.

Observation – acute observation – is close to the heart of love. Whether it is gazing on the glories of nature enabled by the bonanza of the sun, or of the art we make to understand our universe, the act of looking together has helped us to advance, and with joy. Our ability to

observe and to connect together, to celebrate the ‘is-ness’ of the world we can see, and the world we cannot, is close to the best thing about us. This book is about the charged moments when we look as one, and when what we see washes our eyes bright and clean.

It is not hard to imagine a first night. Write a poem, make a sketch, or compose a tune. Let it express sincere feelings. Determine to say your poem to a parent, display your sketch to a lover, or sing your tune to good friends around a table. Before you unveil your creation, you will feel a quickening of the breath, a drumbeat of palpitation and a sharpening of focus. As you do, the air will seem to thicken, and the walls to bulge inward.

Imagine the same process when someone has something passionate to say, when they have spent careers finding the the tools to say it, when they have gathered an army of collaborators to make it happen, and when a crowded room is there to give witness. Take your own imagined first night and multiply the thickening of the air, and the closing of the walls by a thousand. Maximise your pounding heartbeat by the same, as the crowd’s adrenaline produces a communal sharpness of terrifying lucidity. Envision that and you have any of the world’s myriad first nights taking place as you read this.

Beyond such regular occurrences, conjure up the rarest. The moments when not just an individual’s passions are to be exposed, but when the life of a whole community, the story of a tribe, or the concerns of humanity itself, are brought into a shared light. When a crowd come together to witness a creation which encapsulates their history and points them in a fresh direction. Moments of cultural singularity, as in physics, magnetic points in space and time, that suck in past and present and hurl out a reconfigured future. Moments that compel matter beyond to bend inwards, and torque it into new shapes.

Such charismatic events are the theme of this book.



1

Push On Out and Do Something Bigger

A TALE OF
LORRAINE HANSBERRY

8 PM, 10 MARCH 1959, BARRYMORE THEATRE, NEW YORK

The first and only Broadway preview of *A Raisin in the Sun* was about to begin. Philip Rose, the show's producer, shuffled his way towards his seat. For the preceding half hour he had been hiding in a cubicle in the men's room. Short of breath, nauseous, his vision swirling with anxiety, he looked through the gathering for the one person who could offer an exit route from his panic.

The crowd were made up largely of theatre folk, mostly white. They were drawn by the young Sidney Poitier, who enjoyed the fizzing aura of an actor on the cusp of stardom, but not by much else. The advance bookings were horrendous. The subject of the play, the determination of a Black family to move to a white neighbourhood, was not a seller. The producer, director and playwright had never worked on Broadway before, so they weren't going to shift tickets. The fact that the director, Lloyd Richards, was the first Black man to helm a Broadway show, and the playwright the first woman of colour to write for the Great White

Way, should have ignited curiosity. But New York's radical audience would at best fill a third of the stalls for a single show. The other 99.99 per cent were not after an experiment; they wanted some razzle-dazzle.

Rose pushed through to the back of the stalls. His destination was the face that smiled towards him, a face with eyes steady, and lips wrinkled with a twist of humour: the playwright, only twenty-nine years old, and the wisest head in the room. She exuded calm and a mischievous sense of her destiny. She knew why she was there. In her presence, no matter the difficulties, everyone felt the angels were onside. They held hands, squeezing each other's fingers too tight.

This was the culmination of several years of mould-breaking, and taboo-busting. Everything depended on the next two nights. The play began. And was a bit dull. The production had played seven weeks out of town, and somehow it slouched. Everything was slow – the entrances, the movements, the words. Soon enough, the audience began that ancient ritual of disapproval, the communal cough. What, the coughs rumbled, was this play doing here?

At the first interval, an air of panic hovered over the polite applause, and a number of punters left. At the second, the press agent grabbed Rose, and said, 'We need to talk.' He dragged him off to a nearby bar, bought him a drink and talked tough. 'You can open tomorrow and post closing notices immediately. It'll get slaughtered. Or you can delay the opening for two weeks. I'll call Elia Kazan. He's a friend. He can redirect and do some rewriting. Maybe, just maybe, it can be fixed.'

This PR guy was a senior New York player: Philip Rose was a sweet newcomer. 'Why are you telling me this? There is nothing I can do.'

'This is New York. Look at this audience. You think they're enthusiastic?'

Rose stood up, winded. This was all his nightmares bunching together. 'Let me go and watch the end of the play. I can't accept those options. But I'll think about getting drunk.'

The applause at the end was polite, but a long way from celebratory. Rose, with some colleagues, fulfilled his pledge to get smashed. Soon, worse news arrived. They were up late enough to see the next day's papers. *Sweet Bird of Youth* by Tennessee Williams had just premiered and all seven major journals were full of praise for its wonders. Any

theatre person knows the critics have a limited budget of goodwill, and you don't want them spending it before they visit your shop. For the Williams play, they had used up their superlatives not only for the week, but for the whole year.

During some light rehearsal the next day, the atmosphere was glum. Everyone acted brave, though the polite response of the night before had killed optimism. At six o'clock, flowers and gifts started arriving, and people began the roundelay from dressing room to dressing room, with rictus smiles, messages of hope and eyes of terror. The playwright spent the afternoon setting and styling her hair, and climbed into a chic black dress, set off by dazzling earrings. She walked up to the theatre with her husband from their apartment in West Village. An enclave formed around her in the fourth row of family and friends .

Lorraine Hansberry was about to arrive in history.

MAY 24 1963, 24 CENTRAL PARK SOUTH, MANHATTAN

In a flat belonging to his family, an extraordinary meeting is convened by the Attorney General, Robert Kennedy, brother to the President. In the southern states, a febrile state of tension, pressure cooking for over a century, is poised to explode. The long sickness of segregation and exclusion, and the institutionalised racism which underpins it, has been focused in street battles in Birmingham, Alabama. The crisis has crystallised in a single image – a Black woman pushed to the ground by policemen and held down by an officer pressing his knee into her neck.

The meeting – of political and cultural leaders – is to discuss what can be done. The NAACP is there, and the lieutenants of Martin Luther King, together with Harry Belafonte and Lena Horne. So too is Lorraine Hansberry and her great friend, James Baldwin. There is a perception that Kennedy is flattering those present by inviting them into his home, allowing them an influence congruent with their exceptional status. Many are seduced by this. Some aren't.

One of those present, Jerome Smith, is neither celebrity nor political leader. He is a Freedom Rider from the South, one of those who boarded buses crossing the countryside and sat in areas designated 'Whites Only'. His reward has been frequent beatings by the police; he is in New York

to have surgery on his jaw after one such beating. Smith does not know sophisticated New York manners, nor high-status deference and poise. He is from the streets. Before Kennedy can set an agenda, he goes off like a blunderbuss. He lambasts the lawmakers and law-keepers of the South, talking of his own brutalised experience in volcanic eruptions.

Robert Kennedy makes a clumsy play. He turns to the rest of the room with a ‘who-is-this-guy?’ look. He attempts to exclude Smith as an uncouth southerner and to guide the discussion back to political niceties. Many are prepared to allow this, overwhelmed by Kennedy’s charisma. But not Lorraine. There are many reasons to love her, but few greater than for what she does next. James Baldwin said she had a capacity to tower over the room, even when sitting down. This is one such moment.

She interrupts Kennedy while he is talking, greatly to his surprise, and says: ‘You have a great many very accomplished people in this room, Mr Attorney General; but the only man you should be listening to is that man over there [pointing at Smith]. That is the voice of twenty-two million people.’ Kennedy stares flabbergasted, stopped in his tracks. What was supposed to be a Manhattan salon is proving more turbulent and less easy to accommodate than expected. Lorraine goes on: ‘We are not remotely interested in the insulting concept of the exceptional negro, we are not remotely interested in tea at the White House ... We are one people and as far as we are concerned we are represented by the negroes on the streets of Birmingham ... We would like from you a moral commitment!’

Kennedy looks insulted. He and his family believe they own America’s moral positions. As Smith continues, and Kennedy persists in ignoring him, Lorraine stands up again and sums up: ‘What I am very worried about ... is the state of the civilisation which produced that photograph of the white cop standing on that Negro woman’s neck in Birmingham.’ With a thin smile at Kennedy, she walks out. Most follow.

Much about the meeting was repugnant to Lorraine, but mainly it was the invitation to become part of some exclusive club. For her, the cause wasn’t to be represented by leaders and celebrities, it was being led by the Black working class. They were living the difficult lives and fighting the hardest battles. Their only representative in the room was

Jerome Lewis, and, if he didn't have the manners or the articulacy of Third Avenue, all the more reason to listen. The problem wasn't only racism, it was also top-tableism. It was not good enough to invite certain people to sit on a dais; the dais had to be levelled.

Some of the emotional overspill of this meeting can be seen in the interview Baldwin did straight after with a New York psychologist, Dr Kenneth Clark. He looks shocked and in the process of absorbing fresh truths. In this legendary piece of television, he picks up the words of his friend Lorraine, of the need for the US government to make 'a moral commitment'. Though Robert Kennedy thought the meeting had been useless, a month later his brother Jack proposed the legislation that would become the Civil Rights Act. When he did, he spoke of more than a political movement; he spoke of '*a moral commitment*'.

In the five years since her play opened, Lorraine Hansberry had come a long way. Even further than from her beginnings on Chicago's South Side.

THEY FOUGHT BACK!

Lorraine Hansberry was born on 19 May 1930, into a family set-up full of contradictions. She learnt early that fighting each day with grace and humour was the only way to avoid being crushed by them.

Her family lived in a working-class Black neighbourhood on the South Side of Chicago, yet their wealth and connections isolated them. Her father Carl was known as the 'Kitchenette King' and was a real estate entrepreneur among the Black community. His balancing act was a firm belief in both civil rights and capitalism. For him progression was getting ahead. Lorraine's uncle Leo was a pioneering scholar of African studies, a pupil of W.E.B. Du Bois, who himself taught both Kwame Nkrumah, the first Prime Minister of Ghana, and Nnamdi Azikiwe, the first President of Nigeria. Many of the tensions which played through Lorraine's life and art – assimilation vs opposition, communitarianism vs getting ahead, and how to balance the international and the local – were written into her story early.

As was the need to fight. As a child she remembered 'skinny little South Side bodies panting the hours away – with kids who fought – Blacks and whites'. Walking home from school, she would be a target

for white kids because she was Black, and for Black kids because of her class. As she said of the South Side, ‘Each piece of our living is a protest.’ She never forgot the moment she saw a group of Black youths turning up with baseball bats to chase off a crowd of white racists: ‘*THEY FOUGHT BACK!!!*’ Throughout her life, she would never shy from a scrap.

Her father fought one of the defining battles of the time. In 1937, real estate was the borderland of race relations in the northern states. Carl Hansberry had set his sights on living at 6140 Rhodes Avenue, Chicago, a building whose access was limited by a racially restrictive covenant. Enlisting the help of the NAACP, Carl went to war through the courts. Soon his family were under siege, a mob of angry whites patrolling outside. They were cursed and spat on when they went out. Lorraine’s mother wandered their home at night with a Luger pistol. One evening a bladed block of cement was hurled through their window and lodged itself in plaster near the head of the seven-year-old Lorraine. After three years, they won their case in the Supreme Court.

These traumas Lorraine later chose to turn into art, in a play about people, their homes and communities. Given the freight of pain, it is astonishing how light and human her work is. The anguish was felt, but it was never allowed to conceal the messy comedy of life. Accuracy was what mattered. As she said over and over, the path to universality is through the specific. The family in her play, the Youngers, were not ‘a general family, not a general Black family, not a US Black family, they were a Black family from the South Side of Chicago’.

Lorraine attended the University of Wisconsin. Her passion for drama ignited when she went to see Sean O’Casey’s *Juno and the Paycock*. ‘I remember sitting there consumed as that wail rose and hummed through the tenement, through Dublin, through Ireland itself, and then mingled with seas to become something of the Irish wail that was all of us ...’ She fell for both O’Casey and his earlier compatriot, J.M. Synge. She loved the honesty of their realism and its critical edge. They were not writing characters who were ‘a credit to the race’; they loved the flaws of their Irishmen and Irish-women alongside their glories. They were using ‘the most obvious instrument of Shakespeare: the human personality in its totality’. Their concern was not to judge, but to remove judgement, and allow life to flourish. Lorraine quoted the poet Weldon

Johnson's aspiration to follow the Irish: 'What the coloured poet in the US needs to do is something like Synge did for the Irish; he needs to find a form that will express the racial spirit by symbols from within rather than symbols from without.'

Lorraine had a rich collection of linguistic seams to mine, the blues and gospel rhythms of Chicago, street patois, the new ideological language of university graduates, old phrases from the South, and the precision of her own poetry. O'Casey and Synge demonstrated how these languages could come alive in the mouths of ebullient and independent people.

FREEDOM IN NEW YORK

The world was shifting as Lorraine Hansberry was a student. Colonialism was coming to an end, the Cold War falling into rigid place, and America fissuring on ideological lines. Leaving Wisconsin, she headed for New York and to Greenwich Village, learning its manners and its arrogances, and it was not long before she was agitating. Hansberry was born to exemplify Joe Hill's exhortation to organise. She joined any leftist society which passed her eye, and soon grew to lead them. An eager debater, she honed her skills at Speakers' Corner in Harlem, coming to the attention of W.E.B. DuBois and the icon of radicalism, Paul Robeson.

She moved uptown to Harlem, and joined the tiny editorial staff of the journal *Freedom*, founded by Robeson. Here she resourced, received and edited articles, and began to write her own. *Freedom* was pitched well to the left of the NAACP, aiming to conjoin civil rights with revolutionary socialism. Lorraine was soon knocking out essays on anti-colonialism, civil rights and feminism. Argument has raged over whether she was a socialist first and a Black nationalist second, or vice versa. Or maybe for her they were dynamic and provocative companions pushing each other further. What she knew was that it was dangerous to settle on a single right, and that morality was always moving forward. Her instincts also told her the most dangerous people were those without humour. All the while, she fed her curiosity in theatre, enjoying evenings on and off Broadway. Friends recall her reciting chunks of Shakespeare, Chekhov, Synge, Arthur Miller and more. And they remembered her desire to talk theatre at any opportunity, besting them all with her knowledge.

Along the way she married Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish New Yorker. It is a relationship which defies diagnosis, and seems to have been born of shared political beliefs as much as passion. Nemiroff could be controlling after her death in management of her estate, but it is hard not to admire the depth of his commitment to her talent. Lorraine's passions were reserved for her own sex. Typical of her, as soon as she was assured of her sexuality, she joined the appropriate society, a group called the Daughters of Bilitis, and started writing for their journal, *The Ladder*. Lorraine was intersectional long before the word was coined; happy to fight on behalf of her sexuality, her gender, her race, and all.

By a lucky break, though Nemiroff might not have been able to offer much love, he allowed her financial independence. He and a friend co-wrote the song 'Cindy, Oh Cindy', a piece of harmless pap which was such a number 1 smash hit it bought Hansberry the freedom and time to write. Now she could fight with art as well as activism. At a time when few Black writers had ever been produced on Broadway – and no Black woman ever – the very commitment to write was a challenge to the status quo.

BANANA CREAM PIE

One Saturday evening in 1957, Lorraine invited her friend Philip Rose to dinner at her apartment in Greenwich Village at 337 Bleecker Street. They were theatregoing companions and she wanted to read him sections from a play she was working on. She served spaghetti and banana cream pie, then read her scenes. A fire was lit in her friend's imagination.

When he went home, the characters he had met in Lorraine's play were still alive and chatty in his head. So much so that he couldn't sleep. He had to meet this family again. At six-thirty in the morning, he rang Lorraine.

'I want to produce your play.'

'Are you nuts? It's the middle of the night..'

'I want to – I can't sleep..'

'I'm sorry you can't sleep. It's probably my cooking. Call me when it's daylight. And take a Tums.'

They spoke the next day. Rose's passion was persuasive enough to bypass the fact that his producing experience amounted to zero. They started bold, and continued so, hiring a Black director, Lloyd Richards, another first for Broadway. Lorraine carried on finishing her play, while Rose read books and manuals on how to produce, then started looking for money, a Sisyphean task which would consume the next two years. As they defined it, all looked hopeful apart from two obstacles; no-one would invest in the play and no-one would give them a theatre.

Regular backers did not believe an audience would come out to watch Black characters *emoting*. Some producers flirted with the project but demanded changes which undermined the play's integrity; or they wanted a new director; or to downgrade the enterprise by hiding the production in a small theatre. One general manager told them to delay. 'How long?' they asked. 'Ten, twenty years. The world may be ready by then.' Though the play is quiet and domestic, to these theatre owners it seemed to endanger the fabric of their buildings.

Yet miracles started occurring. A surprise cheque from here, an unforeseen commitment from there. The courage and the goodness were there, though lagging way behind what they needed. Securing a star would be the key.

TALK TO MY AGENT

Sidney Poitier had just filmed *The Defiant Ones* and *Porgy and Bess* and his star was in the ascendant. He had the special charisma of an energy about to break. Lorraine and Rose knew him from the Village scene, and invited him round to hear a mysterious new play, telling him Lorraine was going to read all the parts, though not that she was the author. After drinks and chat, Lorraine started. Soon, they were transported from Central Park West to a small apartment in Chicago. Poitier laughed and leant forward into the story.

At the end of the second act, he insisted on knowing the writer. They told him to guess. They laughed as he went through a list of big names, and they shook their heads. His last shot was the biggest name in town, the poet Langston Hughes, which delighted them all the more. Then, in shared recognition, they all shouted together, 'Lorraine Hansberry!' Poitier was fulsome in praise, then, rightly suspecting he had been set

up, said he had to rush, and left. This was a relief to Lorraine, since her third act was still a shambles. But, once it was complete, it was sent to the star.

By this time Rose was in hospital, partly from exhaustion at the efforts to raise money. He was lying in bed, when he was told that Poitier had come to visit.

‘I’ve read your play. How sick are you?’

‘Sick enough that it won’t matter what you think. Take your best shot.’

‘Well, I have to tell you that I’ve decided, regretfully – to play the part.’

Rose shrieked and fell out of his bed, as Poitier ran off down the corridor throwing over his shoulder, ‘Talk to my agent’.

With a star on board, everything started to make sense. Money trickled in, though still way short of what was needed, and other casting fell into place. When the Black acting community found out there was a play with an ensemble of truthful Black characters, a thousand actors turned up to the open call. There was a history of Black characters in comedies, musicals and slapstick, the ‘dose, dese and dem’ kind of roles, but little that looked hard into their lives. Rose’s team secured Ruby Dee, who was something of a name, and found premium players for other parts.

Their struggle was with the central role of Mama, the family’s totem of steadiness, and their strongest link with their past. Late in the day, Claudia McNeil came in. Primarily known as a singer, she had recently played a small part in Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* and made a strong impression. For the team, she captured the essence of the role, even if she lacked experience. It was a gamble, but they went with her, and had a cast.

REHEARSALS

Rehearsals began on 27 December 1958 in the New Amsterdam Roof Garden Theatre on Times Square. This had once been a great theatre, but was now unused, as 42nd Street had become a no-go area. At the meet and greet, the reading flew. Lorraine charmed and Rose bustled around with a manic smile, a smile that concealed the fact he didn’t have a New York theatre to play in, nor the money to get to the end of rehearsals. He had secured one week in New Haven, and two in Philadelphia, but that was

it. The objections were consistent. No white New York audience would pay to see a non-musical about Blacks, and there was no Black audience. Nonetheless, speeches of passion were made, and the reading flew.

While Rose charged around, Lorraine oversaw rehearsals. Her notes for the director survive. Giving notes is a delicate business: they must mix praise and sharpness, and have to define, through practical solutions, the aesthetic of a show. Hansberry's are unimprovable. They encourage truth, wit, passion and dignity. Towards the end of rehearsals she saw a run which pleased everyone, but whose emotionalism alarmed her. She cautioned: 'I like chocolate milk – yet there is nothing quite so nauseous as allowing all that chocolate syrup to fall in a mere one glass of milk. I feel precisely the same about excessive emotionality in a deeply emotional play. There are too many goddamned people on their knees at the end of that scene.' Elsewhere, she defined her instructions in emphatic capitals: 'PLAY WITH IMMENSE EMOTION AND UNBEARABLE RESTRAINT.' She knew her range and wanted the actors in key. She sums up her argument with a beautiful metaphor: 'I consider it a mistake to ever put the wail of TRAGEDY into a mere drama. It makes the pot look so very much larger than the broth, that one can lose one's appetite from hunger.'

At the end of rehearsals, there was a small run-through for friends. It was met with generous laughter, and a liberal use of tissues. The cast headed off on tour, though still without a New York run in place.

ON THE ROAD

Before the first performance in New Haven, Lorraine wrote to her mother: 'Mama, it is a play that tells the truth about people, Negroes and life. And I think it will help a lot of people to understand how we are just as complicated as they are – and just as mixed up – but above all we have, among our miserable and downtrodden ranks, people who are the very essence of human dignity.'

The show had an electrifying first night and its producers stayed up all night discussing it. Rose continued smiling manically, charming investors asking where the New York party was going to be, when he still didn't have a theatre. When they moved to Philadelphia, the excitement grew. To everyone's surprise, the audience was changing, and the proportion

of Black attendees soaring. As the director remembered: ‘This woman in Philadelphia got to the window and asked for a ticket. It was, I think, \$4.80. She started into the theatre and was surprised to be told she couldn’t go in until eight o’clock. So I asked her, “Why are you paying \$4.80 to come to this play?” She said, “The word’s going around my neighborhood that there’s something here that has to do with me.”’

This was a time when Lorraine and James Baldwin grew from acquaintances to the firmest of friends. He was smitten by her: ‘a small, shy, determined person, with that strength dictated by impersonal ambition: she was not trying to make it – she was trying to keep the faith.’ He was even more smitten by the experience of her play: ‘I had never in my life seen so many Black people in the theatre. And the reason was that never in the history of the American theatre had so much of the truth of Black people’s lives been seen on stage. Black people ignored the theatre because the theatre had always ignored them.’

Thankfully, some of the excitement from Philadelphia had filtered back to New York. John Shubert from the all-powerful Shubert Theatre chain came down to watch a matinee. It was a make-or-break moment. His approach was strange. He didn’t watch much of the play, but he did watch the audience – before and during the play and as they left. Their commitment was more important to him than anything on stage, and their commitment impressed. He spoke to Rose: ‘I guess I’ll have to give you a theatre. You can have the Barrymore in five weeks.’

‘What do I do with my show for five weeks?’

‘Go to Chicago – we have the Blackstone Theatre there – you can play there. Then the Barrymore.’

After two years of begging and politicking, all was settled in minutes.

THE G-MEN TAKE NOTE

It was not only the critics and the New York theatre scene keeping an eye on Lorraine. She had long been a subject of interest for the FBI. As the popularity of the play grew, and its effect on Black audiences sharpened their sense of themselves, the interest grew to alarm.

Seven years before, in March 1952, an invitation had come to Paul Robeson to attend an Inter-American peace conference in Montevideo, Uruguay. Robeson’s passport had been revoked by the government, so

he had asked Lorraine to attend as his representative. She was to be one of five US delegates, amongst a group of 280. The conference had been planned for Argentina, then Brazil, then Chile. Each in turn banned it. In Uruguay, everyone attended in disguise, pretending they were convening for a huge party. At the conference, they played loud music and danced merrily outside, before retiring within to deliver earnest papers about the future of Marxism. At one point, while Lorraine was delivering a paper on feminism, word came in that the police were entering. Everyone hid notepads and pens in handbags, and pretended they were at a ladies' tea party. The police glowered and left.

Outside there were mass demonstrations to legitimise the conference. Eventually these succeeded, so they were able to move outside, where the attendees grew to about 5,000. Lorraine spoke to the crowd – articulate and self-possessed – and played them a speech of Robeson's. They went wild for this beautiful, unclouded twenty-two year old. She, too, was thrilled: 'We began to walk, I shall never know where so many young people came from ... they linked my arms with theirs and walked four abreast through the streets of Montevideo.'

A month after her return from Uruguay, the state department came to her mother's home and took her passport away. The FBI began surveillance of her movements. Lorraine took a pseudonym for her socialist articles, John Henry, and another, Emily Jones, for her gay writing. But, as the tour progressed and gathered in popularity, the FBI collected reviews and playbills, and J. Edgar Hoover sent special agents along to see if the play was Communist. One reported back, quite astutely:

The play contains no comments of any nature about Communism as such but deals essentially with negro aspirations, the problems inherent in their efforts to advance themselves, and varied attempts at arriving at solutions ... The quality of some of the acting was applauded, some of the lines drew applause primarily on a racial basis, others appeared to be applauded not only by negroes in the audience but by a substantial number of whites.

The FBI resolved to continue to monitor the play and bring Lorraine in after it had opened in New York. The pressure on a first night is intense in any circumstances. For Hansberry, given all the communities whose

hopes and aspirations she had to match, it was extreme. To have the FBI breathing over her shoulder can't have lightened the burden.

11 MARCH 1959, BARRYMORE THEATRE, NEW YORK

On the first night in New York, two hours after the lights had lowered in the auditorium, and Lorraine and her friends had held hands and breath, Sidney Poitier – Walter Younger – stepped forward on stage. He took time to find his words. The audience sat rigid with tension. By this stage, his choice was their choice, his need their need, his pain their pain, so entire was their engagement. His character's task was to explain, with a concrete directness, why his family wished to occupy their new home, and why they would not be bought out by a neighbourhood representative alarmed by the idea of interracial communities.

The reticence and restrained emotion in his speech, as he recounted the history of his family, choked the audience. This wasn't the cheap aspirin of manufactured catharsis, this was the live crackle of history on the move, impelled by the actions of the humble and defiant. Civil Rights progress might still be decades away, yet no-one could say that change had not occurred in that moment, as a rusted window on the future pushed open. *A Raisin in the Sun* had arrived. The performance had been note-perfect. The energy which had gone AWOL the night before had surged into the room. Everything was fierce and exact, with theatrical precision – life in a state of poetry. Poitier was in a zone of fiery grace as he and McNeil blazed at each other and the rest of the cast shone. As the curtain closed, the audience went crazy, as call after call returned. The critics stopped in their shuffling exit at the back of the stalls to watch the unprecedented ovation.

Soon enough, the chant of 'Author! Author!' went up. Lorraine shrank into her seat, reluctant to take credit. Poitier was as reluctant to give credit away, until he noticed that his arm was being repeatedly punched. He turned to see his co-star, Ruby Dee, pounding him, hissing in a stage whisper, 'Go get her, you son of a bitch. Go get her.' Realising his responsibility, he leapt off stage, ran up the aisle as if flying, and practically carried her back. When Lorraine hit the light and bowed, an almighty roar went up.

Later, Rose and Hansberry made their way to Sardi's, New York's time-honoured post-show hang-out. Before entering, Lorraine said that, like Chekhov after his *Seagull* premiere, she wanted to run home and pull the covers over her head. But the doorman opened the door for her for the third time, and she was nudged forward. Once in the room, silhouetted at the top of the stairs, the whole room stood; everyone was clapping, even the waiters and busboys. Neither Hansberry nor Rose had realised just how many had wanted them to succeed. In his words, 'A beautiful twenty-nine-year-old Black woman stood there – the face of change'.

There are few rushes of sweetly addictive energy more intoxicating than the sensation you are sitting on a Broadway hit. It is a brief main-line of pure adrenalised bliss. Less nutritious than crack, it is hard not to relish. We presented two Shakespeare shows from the Globe in the Belasco in 2013. The happy hour from when a circle of producers and press agents sat in the lobby of a hotel with their smartphones out, all shouting out the rave reviews simultaneously dropping online, through to the entrance at the grand party, where we took the leading players aside, and told them it was a major win, that hour was one of the most unhealthily happy of my life. On an earlier and more glorious journey, Lorraine and Rose went from Sardi's to the Plaza Hotel, where everyone was gathered. Rose was told the reviews were raves, and announced the fact to the crowd. Mayhem ensued.

A few nights later the duo returned to Sardi's for another party. There are a series of photos from that night, taken by the great Gordon Parks. They capture an impossible mix of 1950s hep cool and volcanic joy. Poitier, Harry Belafonte and James Baldwin all exhibit the difficulty of containing those two contradictory states. In some they exemplify effortless chill, sharply poised for the camera. In others, they are just busting with happiness. The crowd squeezed into this space ignite en masse with the same mix of hipster entitlement and exuberance. The walls are plastered with caricature portraits of old famous clientele. Their faces are white. The faces at the party, claiming this space for their own, are largely Black. One face stands out, making no attempt at self-possession, or self-presentation, just unfiltered joy. It is Lorraine. Her hair tousled, skin glistening, eyes alight, she is arriving in the annals of the great, and

doing it with grace. There is none of the angry ‘Now! This is my moment!’; simply the relief of someone knowing she has done what she was meant to do. In one haunting shot, taken from behind a guitarist, Hansberry’s face has an erupting smile. The neck of the guitar crosses her at the neck, and her ecstatic face seems to float free from the rest of her body.

The tragedy is that Hansberry did not know many more nights like this. She would be dead within six years, from pancreatic cancer, at the age of thirty-four.

Somewhere in a less celebratory part of town, a man filed a report. Had the play flopped, the FBI would have brought Lorraine in. But ‘in reconsidering an interview with the subject, it is to be noted that the subject and her play have received considerable notoriety almost daily in the New York press – in view of this it is felt that an interview with her would be inadvisable.’ No-one can argue with success, not even the G-men.

REBUILD THIS HOUSE

When James Baldwin was quizzed about the civil rights issues of the 1960s, he talked about a question of reality. That the dominant White culture had created an artificial reality which would not, and could not, admit the true nature of Black experience. It would neither recognise their alternate reality, nor help to forge a new inclusive one. Lorraine’s achievement was to show Black life as it was, to show it to a large audience, and shift their idea of the world around them. The way to fight is not only to attack the existing state of affairs, or to torch it; another way to fight a wrong world is to birth a new one.

In *A Raisin in the Sun*, after two acts of seething tension in the Younger apartment, Mama returns to the flat with the surprise that she has spent the insurance money they are fighting over. She has bought a new house in a white area. Everyone is astonished. This is not the answer to their antagonisms, this is an entirely new idea. ‘I just seen my family falling apart today ... just falling to piece in front of my eyes ... When it gets like that in life – you just got to do something different, push on out and do something bigger.’

The play’s action has been criticised by some, at the time and since, as assimilation, or bourgeois ambition. This is an injustice; the writing is

too wise to say that aspiration is the answer. What Hansberry proposes is stepping forwards. Whether to a new address or to peace, justice, love and beauty, the first step has to be taken, no matter the confusions and compromises down the line. In a radio discussion, Baldwin and Hansberry concurred: 'It's not a matter of acceptance or tolerance. We've got to sit down and rebuild this house.' 'Yes, and quickly.'

Nonetheless, the critics must have hurt. Norman Mailer patronised her and called her work 'a play about insurance money'. Black radicals attacked her for instilling a middle-class sensibility into working-class life. The Left was suspicious of her success, and had ample evidence to lampoon her, primarily in the cringingly patronising coverage of Lorraine in the press. The apogee of this was a critic who wrote of his pleasure at seeing how 'our dusky brethren [could] come up with a song, and hum their troubles away'. Lorraine felt these attacks, recorded them, and did her best to answer them. She believed in a theatre strangled by neither commercialism nor the self-congratulation of the avant-garde. Fighting for this space exhausted her.

Theatre encourages difference and debate, and nowhere more so than in *A Raisin in the Sun*, which brings so many contrary viewpoints on stage. What lifts it above disputation is that it does not just bring ideas, it brings people. Walter, Ruth, Beneatha, Mama, George – their lively, actual existence denies critiquing. They are individuals – ill-fitting blends of need and wisdom and devilment – and do not represent anyone but themselves. It is that *lively action*, in the Elizabethan phrase for actors, that makes them recognisable and identifiable.

This universality is achieved through the specificity of life lived, of people heard. In the play's third act, Mama warns her daughter Beneatha not to presume she knows her brother: 'When you starts measuring somebody, measure him right ... make sure you done take into account what hills and valleys he come through before he got wherever he is.' Lorraine measured her characters right; those who attacked her, less so.

Exhausted with others' interpretations, she wrote a piece for *Village Voice* that demonstrates the modesty and yet enormity of her ambition:

The symbolism of moving into a new house is quite as small as it seems and quite as significant. For if there are no waving flags and

marching songs at the barricades as Walter marches out with his little battalion, it is not because the battle lacks nobility. On the contrary, he has picked up in his way, still imperfect and wobbly in his view of human destiny, what I believe Arthur Miller called ‘the golden thread of history’. He becomes, in spite of those too intrigued with despair and hatred of man to see it, King Oedipus refusing to tear out his eyes, but attacking the oracle instead. He is that last Jewish patriot manning his rifle in the burning ghetto at Warsaw; he is Anne Frank still believing in people; he is Michelangelo creating David, and Beethoven bursting forth with the Ninth Symphony. He is all those things because he has finally reached out in his tiny moment and caught that sweet essence that is human dignity, and it shines like the old star-touched dream that it is in his eyes.

A DETERMINED ALONENESS

Lorraine died on 12 January 1965. At her funeral Paul Robeson sang, in his last public appearance. In the congregation sat Malcolm X, who risked his life to attend; he was facing a cascade of death threats and his story ended three weeks later. He and Lorraine had befriended each other and spoken with a quiet honesty as both sat under the shadow of imminent death – Lorraine from cancer, Malcolm X from violence.

In the early-1950s, Lorraine had thought of herself as lost in the ‘swirl and dash of the Sartre-Camus debate’, paused like many of her generation before the commitment of involvement. In later years, she sharpened her radicalism and grew closest to the Malcolm X creed – ‘by any means necessary’. Her community, she believed:

... must concern themselves with every single means of struggle. They must harass, debate, petition, give money to court struggles, sit in, lie down, strike, boycott, sing hymns, pray on steps and shoot from their windows when the racists come cruising through their communities. The acceptance of our present condition is the only form of extremism which discredits us before our children.

Fame had bought Lorraine its habitual mixed bag of crazed comforts and cutting loneliness. Baldwin remained an ally to the end, and she enjoyed a passionate friendship on the barricades with Nina Simone,

who celebrated her in the song 'Young, Gifted and Black'. These three formed a trinity, who argued and drank and laughed and argued again. Neither that pleasure, nor two further great plays, settled her spirit. She drank too much, lived too fierce, laughed too hard, loved too keenly and died too fast, with a determined aloneness. As she wrote, 'The thing that makes you exceptional, if you are at all, is inevitably that which must also make you lonely.'

When the world lost Lorraine Hansberry, it lost a great playwright and a woman who could have helped steer American culture and politics for decades to come. It is impossible to overestimate what she could have done and meant. Small compensation is provided in those pictures of her beautiful, swinging glee on the night of her great success. A glee not for herself, but in the knowledge that on that one occasion the world's endlessly imprisoned goodness had been allowed to step out footloose and free, and dance for a brief but gilded moment.