

Extracts taken from an interview with Cheryl Martin
(Children's Director for A RAISIN IN THE SUN)

Cheryl Martin has just finished a stint as Director-in-Residence at Edinburgh's Traverse Theatre, for whom she directed THE CHING ROOM by Alan Bissett (Critics' Awards for Theatre in Scotland-nominated) and AN APPLE A DAY by Jo Clifford. She also produced THE WORLD IS TOO MUCH, Traverse Breakfast Plays for this year's Edinburgh Festival (Fringe First), directing HEAVEN by Simon Stephens and POSTHUMAN SATIRE SLASH ROMANCE for the series. Her most recent Scottish play was GABRIEL by Catherine Grosvenor (Oran Mor, Glasgow). She was Associate Director New Writing/New Work at Manchester's Contact, won a Manchester Evening News Best Studio Production Award for her version of Rona Munro's IRON, directed the UK premiere of Pulitzer-Prize-winning author Suzan-Lori Parks' VENUS for the 2007 Manchester International Festival and PANDA, and began her directing career by assisting Sarah Frankcom for two Royal Exchange productions, KES and RUTHERFORD AND SON. And she started at the Royal Exchange as a Coordinator for the Royal Exchange Education Department's Community Partnerships program.

Cheryl is British-African-American and was born in Washington DC. She came over to the UK in 1983 to go to Emmanuel College at Cambridge University and is now based in Manchester.

Even though I wasn't even born at the time A RAISIN IN THE SUN was first performed, it seems so like my own family – a really accurate snapshot of what was going on at the time.

Generations

Within A RAISIN IN THE SUN you get a strong idea of generational differences. Lena Younger says that her generation doesn't understand this new generation that aren't happy just to be free of lynchings and things like that. This transfers forward as well – for instance, Ruth is pregnant at the time with a baby who would be Obama's (and my) generation, and that generation will have grown up after segregation. So what Ruth, Beneatha and Walter Lee are all going through will be like ancient history to their new baby – they might as well have been in different worlds. Because to grow up after segregation, like I did, means you never really know what that world was like.

Ruth, Beneatha and Walter Lee's generation never told their children (my generation) what it was like to live under segregation. They didn't want us to grow up to hate white people. But it also never occurred to them that we would grow up and marry them! There's a line in the play where Beneatha says "what do they think we're going to do, eat them?" and Ruth says "no marry them" and that was and still is the paranoia of a lot of racists. But I did marry a white guy when I moved over to England and when I took him back to meet my family my grandmother (who had partially brought me up) wouldn't meet him. And I didn't understand why – only then did I find out from other relatives that her brother had been lynched by the KKK and they'd never told me. It never occurred to them that we would ever marry a white person – it was beyond imagining.

Education

Beneatha is training to become a doctor and you see her fighting against several things that, oddly, have not changed that much in the black community. The whole thing with Negro colleges is still relevant... I don't think people realise that under segregation there was a whole parallel university structure in the United States with black colleges, fraternities and sororities that are still going today – back then they would have been all black, but now they are called

'traditionally black' because according to the law you can't refuse to let a white person go if they want to go.

Beneatha is fighting against that whole upper middle class system amongst black people. She wants to be a doctor but other people (including George Murchison) question this and even ask why she has thoughts. When I was at university years later another black girl actually said the same thing to me – when I was arguing about economics or something similar she said that she didn't want to think that much. There are so many echoes of the past coming up out of this play and there are still lots of young people (white and black) who go to university simply to get a degree, or who read books in order to pass an exam, and not to actually question things.

Sexual Politics

It's the sexual politics in the play that actually knock me out. Watching this play explains my mother to me more than anything else ever did. The way Walter Lee treats his wife, and the way that they excuse him is abominable. I still don't even know what I think about it. I can see the compassion of Lena saying at the end that you can't write anyone off, but on the other hand he says some really vicious things.

Walter Lee has massive self pity that I can't get over. Everybody in that room is in the same boat as him, but maybe it's that thing about masculinity and how you deal with problems. The surrounding society at the time would have been very emasculating. I remember growing up hearing about how black women were having to support black guys and I remember thinking "well, I'll support them as much as they support me because we are all going through the same thing". I have to say I wouldn't do what Ruth is doing ever, I would be much more of a Beneatha. I love the way Beneatha deals with her suitors, and how she holds onto her own dream of being a doctor and I find it a great relief compared to the life that Ruth is leading. But on the other hand Ruth is not a doormat. There's nothing easy you can say about this, and I think that's the genius of the writing – there's nothing easy you can say about any of the choices that the characters are making which is why it feels so real.

Aspirations

This is about a family trying to get the regular old American dream. When Walter Lee says 'money is life', there are obviously still people who think that. And there are the traditional barriers to black people doing that which everybody expects (like Mr Lindner and the Clybourne Park Improvement Committee and the threat that we are going to put bricks through your door if you actually come out here) but you also have the barriers that are inside Walter Lee himself – he wants to get rich quick and he's not got the patience to do it the hard way (work) and people still want to do that, they still dream these dreams that are not realistic. And that's universal as well.

The Universal Family Drama

I think A RAISIN IN THE SUN belongs up there with the great American family plays. It's about family life, hopes and dreams, relationships between brothers and sisters, mothers and daughters. The way the family interact makes them seem so real, they are not stereotyped – they are not 'noble black people' which I hate. There's not much noble about Walter Lee, and Beneatha gets a few nasty moves in there too, they act like real people. You're rooting for the family even though they are all flawed in some way. Most of their problems do not come from outside in society, they are from within the family like everybody else. I think a dream season would be to sit this play alongside *Long Day's Journey Into Night* by Eugene O'Neill, *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams, *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller and maybe

Topdog/Underdog by Suzan-Lori Parks. There's also *The Iceman Cometh* by Eugene O'Neill which is all about people having unrealisable dreams.

A lot of 'black' plays now are despairing or all about gangster life – but the thing is that gangster life was there when this play was written too, but for most people, that's not their lives. This play is about people who, badly as they behave towards one another, actually love each other. And I think that basic idea is missing sometimes in some plays that you see now – it doesn't always end in doom and gloom (although I'm not saying it's a fairytale either, because you know that life for the Youngers is going to be very tough out at Clybourne Park).

Relevance For Today

I can imagine that this play was like a bombshell in 1959. There were some movies at the time (for example, *The Defiant Ones* with Tony Curtis and Sidney Poitier) that were trying to bring up the subject in more coded ways, but it was pretty out there in this play – black people talking in their own language about their own lives. I think that for an audience watching this play today, it is about how much things have changed (look at President Obama, who's black and comes from the same city that this play is set in), but also how much some things stay the same. Segregation has gone but there are still a lot of people in every city in America who are finding it hard to move on and that American dream is elusive.