

# Lorraine Hansberry's Wisdom

continued ▲ from page 11

tious work. The play is so far ahead of its time that I wonder if we are ready even now for the prophetic insight of Ms. Hansberry, so famously young, gifted, and black. But I'm grateful that the Oregon Shakespeare Festival has gone to the trouble to offer us this opportunity.

Mounting this revival was no mean feat. There are several versions of the script in existence, including some edits and rewrites completed after Hansberry's death by her ex-husband and collaborator, Robert Nemiroff, Director Juliette Carillo and her creative team carefully worked with the unwieldy collected text to capture Hansberry's intention and to hone the production to a story that will keep audiences engaged even as they are challenged. Those efforts, including the work of a very fine and sensitive cast, have resulted in a production that hums with authenticity.

It is an ambitious effort. Rather than remaining in the box created by her success with "A Raisin in the Sun," Hansberry dared to write a play that reaches beyond black experience to depict a more expansive range of perspectives, in service of a complex mix of ideas.

Her protagonists are a Jewish intellectual and his wife, Iris, living in Greenwich Village in the early 1960s.

Sidney is someone you might recognize -- a liberal intellectual who has acquired the tools for higher thought, but who frequently neglects to self-apply his insights. His marriage to Iris -- an aspiring actress who can't summon the courage to audition -- is full of wit and affection, but also with the merciless barbs they lob at each other. Iris, is a product of her time -- intelligent and

perceptive, but imprisoned within a limited set of options that affect her perception of herself.

He vastly underestimates her -- and she is losing patience with his penchant for pursuing ill-advised projects that exceed his resources and talent. Both seem immobilized, though the quality of Sidney's superior tone suggests that he would apply that description only to Iris. Neither can seem to light on a life purpose to commit to, and their commitment to their marriage is hampered by their illusions about each other.

Their community exposes them to an array of intellectual perspectives. Their cynical upstairs neighbor, David, is a gay playwright who is closeted outside their circle. Another friend, Walter, is running an underdog campaign that purports to provide a clean alternative to dirty local politics.

Alton, a light-skinned black man who passes as white, chides Sidney for his lack of political engagement. Alton is in love with Iris's younger sister Gloria, who he believes is a model but who Sidney and Iris know is a high-class call girl. Gloria is a heartbreaking mix of vulnerability, hope, and cynicism. Finally, Iris's older sister, Mavis, appears to be the most conventional of the three sisters, dropping by to offer provincial comments and judgments that strike Sidney as naive and, occasionally, dangerous.

Part of what makes the play so wonderful is that these characters are not just types, but believable, flawed human beings. Their struggles are presented deftly and with empathy -- yet no one gets off easy. Each character has moments that illuminate genuine suffering -- shockingly clear and nuanced moments for 1964, and refreshingly so even

for 2014. Yet each character also displays small-minded impulses; each grasps for primacy in whatever form, be it the moral high ground or simply the power to get one's own needs met at someone else's expense.

This community of intellectuals -- relatively accepting for 1964 -- can converse about problems that occupy us still, with a level of insight that at times seems enviable even to current ears. Yet action consistent with their ideals often eludes them.

That anyone -- let alone a black woman in 1964 -- dared to assemble this cast of flawed characters and to struggle in such a nuanced way with the problems that occupy their existence is remarkable. But Hansberry attempted more. Her play grapples with what it means to be human, to take a stand and attempt to contribute to positive change, even when one's efforts seem unsatisfying or futile.

Each of the characters struggles uniquely with the problem of engagement -- of whether and how to aim for something, and of what balance to strike between analysis and courageous agency. The mix of results is surprising.

For example, Mavis, whose assessments of others are chock full of conventional stereotypes, nevertheless displays a remarkable capacity for nuance. Compared to Sidney, Wally seems a man of action -- but his articulation of how he subordinates his principles in the name of expediency seems chillingly familiar. Meanwhile, Sidney and Iris are, by contrast, relatively stuck -- and one can question whether their principles are too robust or too inflexible.

Hansberry has no easy solution for these dilemmas -- and that is both a strength of the play and a problem for it.

Sidney is rigid and often unlikable, and he undergoes a transformation late in the play that is not entirely satisfying. The conflicts in his marriage to Iris, too, are too thorny to find convincing resolution, although the final act offers something like one.

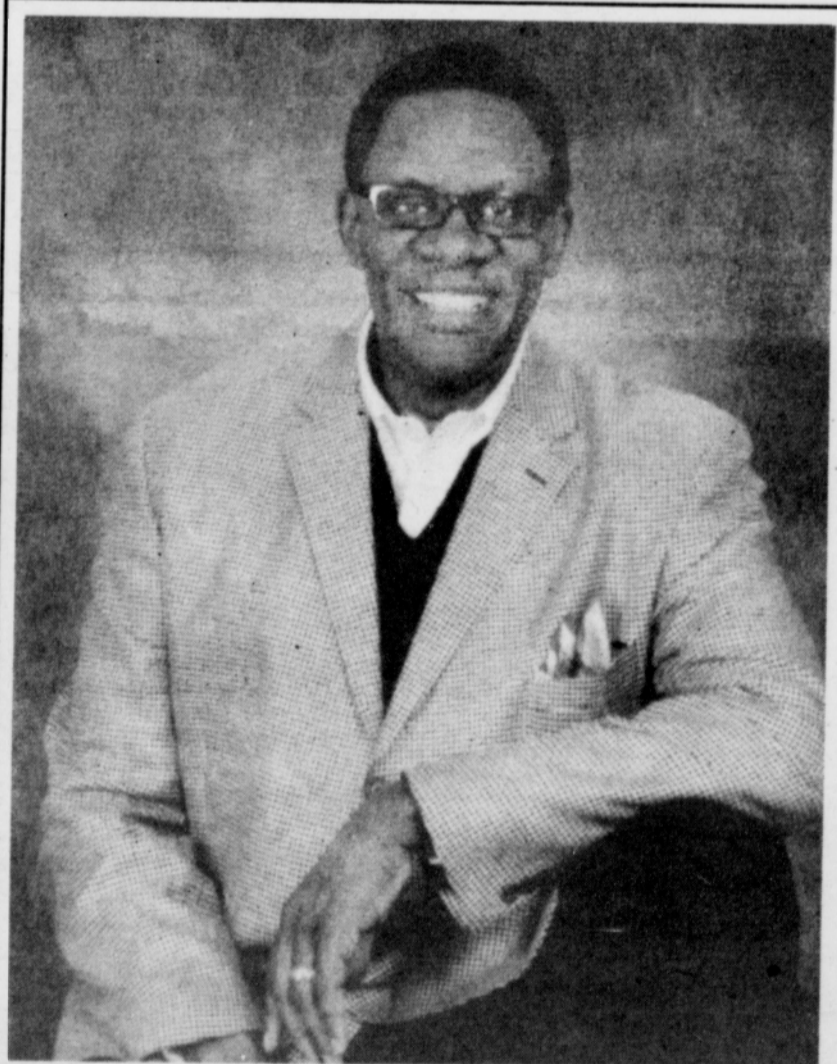
But the messiness in this play feels, for the most part, fitting. Hansberry, remarkably for her time and for any time, displays the courage of her convictions.

In the world of her play, intelligent, well-meaning people sometimes make decisions that add to the oppression of others. It can happen because they are distracted by their own oppression, or because they are closing their eyes to a piece of what's true, or because they are afraid to act at all.

Although the resolutions Hansberry chooses are not always satisfying, she commits to them. As a playwright, she models a life of compassion toward difference, an open-eyed commitment to the struggle for truth. She eschews apathy in favor of a struggle to live into one's ideals even if the options one can see for doing so feel unsatisfying.

This Oregon Shakespeare Festival production, which plays until July 3, offers a rich glimpse into the prophetic wisdom of a true visionary. It's worth a trip to Ashland this spring to enter Hansberry's world. (Visit [osfashland.org](http://osfashland.org) for tickets and more information.)

*Darleen Ortega is a member of the Oregon Shakespeare Festival Board of Directors. A judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals, she is the first woman of color to serve in that capacity. Her movie review column Opinionated Judge appears regularly in The Portland Observer.*



Dr. Billy R. Flowers

## THE SPINA COLUMN™

An ongoing series of questions and answers about America's natural healing profession.

### Part 26 KIDS AND CHIROPRACTIC

As the twig is bent so grows the tree

**Q**: I have recently noticed my son has one shoulder higher than the other. Could this be a sign of a problem in his spine?

**A**: Good thinking, mom! It surely could. In fact having one shoulder higher than the other is a cardinal sign of curvature of the spine. According to Chiropractic research, the earlier a curvature is caught, the higher the potential for success. To be certain about health of your child, call our office today for a professional spinal evaluation. Spines (big or small) are

our specialty.

**Q**: I have been told that my child needs an operation for a curvature in her spine. Is there an alternative?

**A**: You most definitely should have a thorough Chiropractic checkup on your child immediately. Spinal surgery gets. All conservative efforts at handling your child's problem should be considered before consenting to surgery. Our office is highly

trained and skilled at handling problems like that of your child's. Don't be fooled by the thought of "watching the condition" either. Without proper assistance it won't go away. Offer your children the best in health care. Give them regular Chiropractic checkups. As the twig is bent so grows the tree!

**Flowers' Chiropractic Office**

2124 NE Hancock, Portland Oregon 97212 • Phone: (503) 287-5504