

Lorraine Hansberry Biography

Lorraine Hansberry was born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois. She wrote *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play about a struggling black family, which opened on Broadway to great success. Hansberry was the first black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Critics' Circle award. Throughout her life she was heavily involved in civil rights. She died at 34 of pancreatic cancer.

She was a playwright, an author, and an activist. The granddaughter of a freed slave, and the youngest by seven years of four children, Lorraine Vivian Hansberry 3rd was born on May 19, 1930, in Chicago, Illinois. Hansberry's father was a successful real estate broker, and her mother was a schoolteacher. Her parents contributed large sums of money to the NAACP and the Urban League. In 1938, Hansberry's family moved to a white neighborhood and was violently attacked by neighbors. They refused to move until a court ordered them to do so, and the case made it to the Supreme Court as *Hansberry v. Lee*, ruling restrictive covenants illegal. Hansberry broke her family's tradition of enrolling in Southern black colleges and instead attended the University of Wisconsin in Madison. While at school, she changed her major from painting to writing, and after two years decided to drop out and move to New York City.

In New York, Hansberry attended the New School for Social Research and then worked for Paul Robeson's progressive black newspaper, *Freedom*, as a writer and associate editor from 1950 to 1953. She also worked part-time as a waitress and cashier, and wrote in her spare time. By 1956, Hansberry quit her jobs and committed her time to writing. In 1957, she joined the Daughters of Bilitis and contributed letters to their magazine, *The Ladder*, about feminism and homophobia. Her lesbian identity was exposed in the articles, but she wrote under her initials, L.H., for fear of discrimination.

During this time, Hansberry wrote *The Crystal Stair*, a play about a struggling black family in Chicago, which was later renamed *A Raisin in the Sun*, a line from a Langston Hughes poem. The play opened at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on March 11, 1959, and was a great success, having a run of 530 performances. It was the first play produced on Broadway by an African-American woman, and Hansberry was the first black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Critics' Circle award. The film version of *A Raisin in the Sun* was completed in 1961, starring Sidney Poitier, and received an award at the Cannes Film Festival.

In 1963, Hansberry became active in the Civil Rights Movement. Along with other influential people, including Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne and James Baldwin, Hansberry met

with then attorney general Robert Kennedy to test his position on civil rights. In 1963, her second play, *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, opened on Broadway to unenthusiastic reception.

Hansberry met Robert Nemiroff, a Jewish songwriter, on a picket line, and the two were married in 1953. Hansberry and Nemiroff divorced in 1962, though they continued to work together. In 1964, the same year *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* opened, Hansberry was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. She died on January 12, 1965. After her death, Nemiroff adapted a collection of her writing and interviews in *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, which opened off-Broadway at the Cherry Lane Theatre and ran for eight months.

A Raisin in the Sun is considered one of the hallmarks of the American stage and has continued to find new audiences throughout the decades, including Emmy-nominated television productions from both 1989 and 2008. The play has earned accolades from Broadway as well, winning Tony Awards in 2004 and 2014, including Best Revival of a Play.

