

‘Raisin in the Sun’s’ message resonates as ‘Dallas Faces Race’



Ben Torres/Special Contributor

The Dallas Theater Center has opened its new season with "A Raisin in the Sun" at the Wily Theater.

By Kevin Moriarty

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It's time to talk about race in Dallas.

At a moment when mayor Mike Rawlings, county commissioner Elba Garcia and council member Dwaine Caraway have called on residents to enter into conversations about race and how it impacts our city, and as we look ahead to the Dallas Faces Race national conference that will convene here in 2014, it's clear that the time has come for everyone in our community to join in frank, open and honest conversations.

In 1959, the year Dallas Theater Center was founded, Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, opened on Broadway, the first time a play written by an African-American woman had broken that barrier. It told the story of a black family preparing to move into an all-white neighborhood and heralded an age of racial integration in America's cities.

And yet, as soon as all-white neighborhoods began to become integrated, white flight began. In many cities, during the 1960s and '70s, the dream of a fully integrated America began to disintegrate. As white people fled to the suburbs, economic resources were shifted away from the cities, resulting in poverty, crime, drugs and neglect.

Fifty years after Hansberry's groundbreaking play premiered, American cities have changed again, with many of the now all-black neighborhoods slowly being gentrified. Prosperous white families began to return to reclaim inner-city neighborhoods as their own, often resulting in a new wave of de facto segregation.

Even as Americans were celebrating the signs of racial progress heralded by the inauguration of the first African-American president in 2008, others were asking: What are we to make of these ongoing patterns of racial migration to and from inner-city neighborhoods? Are these signs of hopeful change or are they yet another example of a dream deferred?

In 2009, Bruce Norris, a Pulitzer Prize winning white playwright, wrote a new play, *Clybourne Park*, set in the same house Hansberry's characters moved into, but now focusing on the white people who live in the neighborhood. He examines how little has changed in our ability to talk openly about race over the past 50 years. He portrays contemporary characters who hide behind politically correct conversations that barely cover up the racial divide. Limited by geographic isolation and fear of saying the wrong thing, the characters tie themselves in knots trying to avoid an honest conversation.

Some people suggest that we already had this conversation in the 1960s and '70s and that it is no longer relevant today, when so many racial barriers in public life have been broken. But if we ask ourselves three basic questions about our own personal lives, the challenge we still face is instantly clear: Where do we live? Where do our children go to school? Where do we worship?

The honest answer is that most Dallasites still live our lives in a racial bubble. We're aware of each other, support legal equality, and participate in politics, sports and entertainment that are highly diverse; and yet our daily, intimate, personal lives — and therefore our conversations — remain racially isolated. At best, politeness replaces deeper engagement. At worst, silence covers fear.

But I believe an honest dialogue among well-meaning people of all races and experiences is possible. Change — though slow at times and often immensely difficult — can occur. Progress toward a more perfect union is both necessary and achievable in our great city that has been blessed with such wealth, opportunity and ideals.

A Raisin in the Sun is currently running at the Wyly Theatre; it will be in rotating repetition with *Clybourne Park* beginning in October.

Inspired by the call of our civic leaders, and with a belief in the power of Dallas to continually reinvent itself, we are going to invite DTC's audience members to come together after every performance of both *A Raisin in the Sun* and *Clybourne Park* to engage in post-show conversations about race with members of the cast and each other. We hope these conversations will continue in the car ride home and with family and friends in the days and weeks that follow. As these conversations build and expand, they will model a future for Dallas marked by honest dialogue and genuine respect. And from that, change will come.

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Conversations About Race

When: 10 to 11:30 a.m. Saturday.

Where: City Performance Hall, 2520 Flora St.

Panelists: Univision Dallas anchor Crystal Ayala, Dallas Examiner publisher Mollie Finch Belt, CitySquare vice president Gerald Britt, Fort Worth Star-Telegram columnist Bob Ray Sanders and dallasnews.com managing editor Robert Wilonsky. Skot Welch, co-host of Radio in Black and White, will moderate.

Registration: The event is free and open to the public, but seating will be limited, and advance registration is required at conversationsaboutrace.eventbrite.com. Registration does not guarantee a seat; participants should arrive at least 30 minutes early.