An Author's Reflections:

Willie Loman, Walter Younger, And He Who Must Live

by Lorraine Hansberry

"A man can't go out the way he came in . . . Ben, that funeral will be massive!"  —Willy Loman, 1946

"We have all thought about your offer and we have decided to move into our house."

—Walter Lee Younger, 1958

Some of the acute partisanship revolving around "A Raisin in the Sun" is amusing. Those who announce that they find the piece less than fine are regarded in some quarters with dramatic hostility, as though such admission automatically implies the meanest of racist reservations. On the other hand, the ultra-sophisticates have hardly acquitted themselves less ludicrously, gazing coolly down their noses at those who are moved by the play, and going on at length about "melodrama" and/or "soap opera" as if these are not completely definable terms which cannot simply be tacked onto any play and all plays do not like.

Personally, I find no pain whatever—at least of the traditional ego type—in saying that "Raisin" is a play which contains dramatic incompletions. Fine plays tend to utilize one big fat character who runs right through the middle of the structure, by action or implication, with whom we rise or fall. A central character as such is certainly lacking from "Raisin." I should be delighted to pretend that it was inventive ness, as some suggest for me, but it is also, art inadequacy and creative indecision. The result is that neither Walter Lee nor Mama Younger room large enough to monumentally command the play. I consider it an enormous dramatic fault if no one else does.

(Nor am I less critical of the production which, by and large, performance and direction alike, is splendid. Yet I should have preferred that the second act, in which, for instance, had been performed with quiet assertion rather than the apparently popular declaratory opulence which prevails.)

LORRAINE HANSBERRY, author of "A Raisin in the Sun," lives on Bleecker Street in Greenwich Village.

BUOYANT BILLIONS GETTING MARRIED

Shaw's "comedy of manners." In a production by Norman Roland, with Shaw's "Overruled" as a curtain-raiser, and "Getting Married" alternating in every other day repertoire.

JULIUS CAESAR

New York Shakespeare Festival production of the play by William Shakespeare. Staats Cotsworth heads the cast. Joseph Papp is the producer. Stuart Vaughan is the director. Performances nightly except Mondays, at 8:30, through August 22. Theatre is in Belvedere Tower area of Central Park, on West side at 113th Street. Admission Free. See review by Jerry Tallmer, this page.

LEAVE IT TO JANE

Kathleen Murray in a revival of the Kern-Wodehouse-Bolton musical-comedy hit of 1917.

MARK TWAIN TONIGHT

Hart Holbrock's one-man recreation of Samuel Clemens, wise and witty, at the age of 70.

LORRAINE HANSBERRY Voice: Gin Briggs

All in all, however, I believe that, for the most part, the play has been magnificently understood. In some cases it was not only thematically absorbed but attention was actually paid to the tender treachery of its craft-posed "simplicity." Some, it is true, quite missed that part of the overt intent and went on to harangue the bones of the play with rather useless observations of the terribly clear fact that they are old bones indeed. More meaningful discussions tended to delve into the flesh which hangs from those bones and its implications in mid-century American drama and life.

In that connection it is interesting to note that with the names of Chekhov, O'Casey, and the early Odets were introduced for comparative purposes in some of the reviews, almost no one—with the exception of Gerald Weales in Commentary—discovered a simple line of descent between Walter Lee Younger and the last great hero in American drama to accept the values of his culture, Willy Loman. I am sure that the already mentioned primary fault of the play must account in part for this. The family so overwhelms the play that Walter Lee necessarily falls as the true symbol he should be, even though his ambitions, his frustrations, and his decisions are those which decisively drive the play on. But however recognizable he proves to be, he fails to dominate our imagination and finally emerges as a reasonably interesting study, but not, like Arthur Miller's great character—and like Hamlet, of course—a summation of an immense (though not crucial) portion of his culture.

Prior Attitudes

Then too, in fairness to the author and to Sidney Poitier's basically brilliant portrayal of Walter Lee, we must not completely omit reference to some of the prior attitudes which were brought into the theatre from the world outside. For in the minds of many, Continued on page 8
An Author's Reflections:

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Continued from page 7

Walter remains, despite the play, despite performance, what American radical traditions with him to be: an exotic. Some writers have been astonishingly incapable of discussing his purely classic aspirations and have persistently confounded them with what they consider to be an exotic being's longing to "wheel and deal" in what they further consider to be (and what Walter never can) "the white man's world." Very few people today must consider the ownership of a liquor store as an expression of extraordinary influence, and yet, as joined to a dream of Walter Younger, it takes on, for some, aspects of the fantastic. We have grown accustomed to the dynamics of "Negro" personality as expressed by white authors. Thus, de Empero, de Lewit, and so many publish their frame of reference when a new character emerges. We have now become romantically jealous of the great image of prototype when we believe is summarized by the wishfulness of a self-assertion process. Presumably there is a quality in human beings that makes us wish that we were capable of primitive contentments; the unadulterated ambition and its anguish can escape us only if we construct elaborate legends about the rudimentary simplicity of other men.

America, for this reason, longs to project on the image of the simple, lovable, and glumolcular Negro." We all know that Cal- fish Row was never intended to be taken anywhere; it was intended, as a mental haven for readers and audiences who could bask in the unashamed passions of those who, by reason of social or economic circumstances, were almost by implication, it was our familiar recognition of his imprisonment, which suicide, or death.

New Typicality

What then is the new figure in the performance whose appearance is in American drama in 1959, from what source is it derived, what are its social and class differences, so much of his encirclement must begin to work, and, finally, what of the performance of the Yoman? Why, finally, is it possible that this his-third act is what "beauty," his typicality is capable of a change in his life? After all, Walter Younger is an American man that he is, and whose he is, and his personal expression of it, is not extraordinary but intensely individual. The two of them have very much in common, which may not come out of their culture, and to a significant point, no view is taken of the problems which do not also come out of the self-same culture. There is no peace with that part of society which may permit him to make no entry into that which he has wilfully excluded him from. Let the man the acute awareness that something is obstructing some abstractive, or if anything should be making; that something is in the way of his ascendency. It does not occur to either of them to question the nature of that desired "ascendency." Walter accepts, he believes in the "world" that it has been and is. When we first meet him, he does not wish to alter it; merely to change his position in it. His men- tors and his associates all take the view that the institutions which frustrate him are somehow impervious, or, at least, "unfortu- nate." "Things being as they are," he must look to himself as source of any rewards. He may try, but within himself, he is encouraged to believe, are the only seeds of defeat or victory in the universe. And Walter believes this and when opportunity, haphazard and rooted in depth, gravitate, he acts.

But the obstacles which are introduced are gigantic; the weight of the loss of the money is in fact the first time the Lomans' lives have been threatened. Walter Lee Younger's life, somebody has to die for ten thousand bucks to be made. It is a fact that the world, in the face of catastrophe, he might be tempted to don the scaffold robes of acceptance and surrender, in contemplation of the divine justice of his misery. Or, history being what it is turning out to be, he might wander down to his first Communist Party meeting. But in the dynamic and confusing post-war years on the South- side of Chicago, his choice, of ac- tion are equal to those gestures only in symbolic terms. The American ghettos may give him no up and contemplate his misery in rose-colored bars to the melo- dies of hypnotic saxophones, but revolution seems alien to him in his circumstances (America), and it is easier to dream of personal than of social revolution wherein universal dignity is supposed to be corroborated. Yet his position in time and space does allow for one alternative: he may take his place on any one of a number of frontiers of change. That is, in order to get to the city, by breaking down restricted neighborhoods (which are admittedly limited because they must certainly do not threaten the bal- ancic social order.

Not So Small

But why is even this final choice possible, considering the ever- present (and ever so popular) "two fish of despair? Well, that is to recognize that for his true Lomans; there is a second pulse in his still ducal culture. His po- sition of having "some东西" they have been trying to get for so long that more sophisticated confusions do not yet bind them. That the weight and power of their current social temperament intrudes and affects him, and if it isn't at the moment, is that, glor- ously and rigidly affirmative. In the course of their brutality diffi- cult ascent, they have dismissed the ostrich as all right, if you go to the rock, to hide my face, but the rock cried out: 'No hide!"

On the ground, and he was not afraid of its being insufficient, well, despite his lack of consciousness of it, inextricably as much wed- ded to his special mass as Wil- lis was to his, and the moods of each are able to decisively determine the dramatic typicality. Furthermore, the very nature of American Negroes can force their representative hero to recognize that for his true ascendency he must ultimately be at cross-purposes with at least certain of his "commoner" values. It is to the path of Walter Lommen that his section of American life seems to have momentarily lost quite as significant. For if there are no waving flags and marching songs at the barricades as Walter marches out with his little bat- eau, it is not because the bat- eau lacks nobility. On the contrary, he has picked up in his way, still imperfect and wobbly in the small view of human des- tiny, what I believe Arthur Miller once called "the golden thread of history." He becomes, in spite of those who are too intrigued with despair and hatred of man to see it, King Cepheid refusing to tear out his eye, but attacking the Oracle instead. He is that last Jewish patriot manning his rifle at the opening of his little Warsaw; he is that young girl who swam into sharks to save a friend a few weeks ago; he is Anne Frank, still believing in love; he is the nine- little heroes of Little Rock; 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 world for that sweet essence which is human dignity, and it shines like the old star- touched dream that is in his eyes. We see, in the moment, what I think, becomes, and not for Negro alone, but for Walter and all of us, entirely an American responsibility.

Out in the darkness where we watch, most of us are not afraid to cry.

SONG

(for Weldon Rees)

Oh, certainly, there Is still a song to be sung! No certain ending to A beginning hardly begun; No end seems to me Legal to the lawless young: The seeming grace of carelessness Is a game that is won by none. And caring more and more, I know, Can break the neck of the swan hung In view of the altar of knowl- edge (Seldom more than dead swans). Run