

## Toronto International Film Festival: Part 5

# African American playwright Lorraine Hansberry, a revolution betrayed in Portugal and other matters

Joanne Laurier

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*This is the fifth in a series of articles devoted to the recent Toronto International Film Festival (September 7-17). Part 1 was posted September 22, Part 2 was posted September 26, Part 3 on September 28 and Part 4 on September 30.*

## *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart*

Tracy Heather Strain's new documentary *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart* chronicles the life of African-American writer Lorraine Hansberry (1930-1965), famed author of *A Raisin in the Sun*, a play about black working class life in Chicago in the 1950s. Strain's movie takes its title from Hansberry's contention that "one cannot live with sighted eyes and feeling heart and not know or react to the miseries which afflict this world."

Filmmaker Strain was the coordinating producer for the 2016 documentary, *The Mine Wars/American Experience*, about the West Virginia coal miners' uprisings in the early 20th century.

Lorraine Hansberry was politically and artistically influenced by and personally knew historian W.E.B. Dubois, singer Paul Robeson and poet Langston Hughes among other significant African American intellectuals. The title of *A Raisin in the Sun* comes from Hughes' poem "A Dream Deferred," in which he asks, "What happens to a dream deferred? Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun, Or does it explode?"

Strain's documentary combines fascinating archival material and interview footage of Hansberry, as well as Anika Noni Rose's reading of Hansberry's words. It presents a straightforward and enlightening picture of a woman who was smart, sensitive and rebellious, tragically dying of pancreatic cancer at the age of 34.

Hansberry was born in Chicago during the Great Depression. When her family moved to a "hellishly hostile white neighborhood," her father became involved in a battle to end restrictive housing covenants that prohibited the sale of houses to African Americans, Jews and others.

At the University of Wisconsin in the late 1940s, Lorraine Hansberry joined the Communist Party, through the medium of the Henry Wallace campaign. Moving to New York City, Hansberry then worked for Paul Robeson's magazine, *Freedom*. In 1953, she met songwriter and activist Robert Nemiroff on a picket line in New York, and they soon married. (Nemiroff co-wrote the song "Cindy, Oh Cindy," famously recorded by Eddie Fisher in the 1950s.) The couple divorced in 1962, and Hansberry later became an activist for gay rights.

Debuting ~~An~~ *A Raisin in the Sun* ~~in the~~ *1959*, age 29, the youngest American and the first black playwright to win the Best Play of the Year Award from the New York Drama Critics. A film version of the play was released in 1961, featuring its original Broadway cast of Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, Claudia McNeil and Louis Gossett, Jr., among others.

*Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart* does not shy away from the fact that Hansberry, like other black artists, such as Robeson, novelist Richard Wright, singer-actor Harry Belafonte, Dee and Hughes, turned to the Communist Party, seeing the fight against racism as part of the fight against capitalism.

That *A Raisin in the Sun* was not an exclusivist work, that it was intended to illuminate the lives of working people of all races and ethnicities, helped account for its wide popular appeal.

"Mama: Oh—So now it's life. Money is life. Once upon a time freedom used to be life—now it's money. I guess the world really do change. . .

Walter: No—it was always money, Mama. We just didn't know about it." (*A Raisin in the Sun*)

According to director Strain, Hansberry was influenced, among other works, by Irish dramatist Seán O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* (1924), a play about the Dublin slums during the Irish civil war in 1922. Hansberry's play is humane and sincere. If it does not rise to the dramatic heights of O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock* or *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), the stagnant, conformist atmosphere in the US has a great deal to do with it.

Interestingly, Hansberry's friend, singer Nina Simone, quipped that when she and the writer got together, "It was always about Marx, Lenin and revolution—typical girl talk." In his memoirs, another friend, Belafonte, states that in his early years, he moved in circles of "socialists and communists [who] embraced the working class as the bedrock of a new political order." Notably, on June 18, 1953, on the eve of their marriage, Hansberry and Nemiroff were picketing the Chicago Federal Building against the execution scheduled for the following day of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, Communist Party members who were convicted of spying for the Soviet Union.

Hansberry once wrote: "A status not freely chosen or entered into by an individual or a group is necessarily one of oppression and the oppressed are by their nature (i.e., oppressed) forever in ferment and agitation against their condition and what they understand to be their oppressors. If not by overt rebellion or revolution, then in the thousand and one ways they will devise with and without consciousness to alter their condition."

There was obviously a tragic element to the fact that these artists gravitated toward a thoroughly Stalinized organization, which while

claiming the mantle of the October Revolution, rejected social revolution and directed its supporters back toward the Democratic Party and capitalism.

It is not clear when Hansberry left the Communist Party. In an interview with Harold Isaacs, she apparently told him that she “had quietly left in the late 1950s.” FBI spies concluded that Hansberry had quit the party before its 1957 convention. Presumably, the Soviet Stalinist suppression of the Hungarian Revolution and Khrushchev’s secret speech lifting the lid on Stalin’s crimes, both occurring in 1956, had some bearing on her departure.

In any event, frankly, the drift from the Stalinist party to openly liberal Democratic Party circles did not require much of an internal revolution by this time. *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart* includes a video clip of the 1963 meeting between Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Hansberry, Belafonte, James Baldwin and other civil rights activists, which ended with Hansberry’s walkout. The documentary does not mention that after the meeting Kennedy ordered FBI director J. Edgar Hoover to increase the surveillance on Baldwin and several others. One of the results was an FBI report labeling the gay Baldwin a “pervert” and “communist.”

A few citations from *A Raisin in the Sun* may help shed light on Hansberry’s political thinking and her general view of life. The universality of her concerns is expressed in lines such as these: “I’m just tired of hearing about God all the time. What has He got to do with anything?... I’m not going to be immoral or commit crimes because I don’t believe. I don’t even think about that. I just get so tired of Him getting the credit for things the human race achieves through its own effort. Now, there simply is no God. There’s only man. And it’s he who makes miracles.”

Or this passage that speaks to the question of class: “Life is. Sure enough. Between the takers and the ‘tooken.’ I’ve figured it out finally. Yeah. Some of us always getting ‘tooken.’”

Hansberry’s intellectual development, cut short by disease, suffered from the deleterious impact of Stalinism and the ideological reaction of the postwar period. Nonetheless, Tracy Heather Strain’s *Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart* provides a valuable examination of a remarkable, courageous woman who fought against the existing social order on the grounds that “an oppressive society oppresses everyone.”

In a 1988 introduction to *A Raisin in the Sun*, Nemiroff wrote that the play “will remain no less pertinent. For at the deepest level it is not a specific situation but the human condition, human aspiration, and human relationships—the persistence of dreams, of the bonds and conflicts between men and women, parents and children, old ways and new, and the endless struggle against human oppression, whatever the forms it may take, and for individual fulfillment, recognition, and liberation—that are at the heart of such plays. It is not surprising therefore that in each generation we recognize ourselves in them anew.”

### ***The Nothing Factory and a cosmonaut stuck in space***

Portuguese filmmaker Pedro Pinho’s *The Nothing Factory* details the struggle against the closing of a Fortis-Otis Elevator plant in the industrial outskirts of Lisbon that began in April-May 1975. The most intriguing part of the three-hour fictional recreation of the events is its opening sequence, which has the ring of truth to it. Workers arrive to see machinery being taken out of the plant and are introduced to a team of specialists parachuted in to placate the disgruntled workers with platitudes such as “the moment of crisis is a moment of opportunity.”

(Interestingly, several nervous US State Department communications, from May 1975, made public by WikiLeaks, report on the workers’ action

and the fact that management has been locked out.)

“When I hear ‘readjustment,’ I hear lay-offs,” one worker observes. “If I’m sacked, I’ll have nothing,” says another. All agree that “they’ve torn our flesh, broken our bones.” As the employees are summoned one by one before management to be told the amount of their severance pay, the workforce bands together and occupies the factory. From there, a great deal of political confusion reigns and the role of so-called radicals egging on the workers to take part in an isolated, test-tube experiment of “workers control” comes to the fore.

A movie that centers on working class resistance is a rare and welcome occurrence. During a question-and-answer session in Toronto, Pinho indicated his film was based on the occupation and subsequent supposed workers’ ownership of the elevator factory that lasted until 2016, when orders ran out. Pinho noted that at the time of the overthrow of the Portuguese fascist regime and accompanying upheaval in 1974-75, hundreds of factory occupations took place, the Otis action simply being the longest.

Of course, running a business for 40 years has nothing to do with socialism or genuine workers’ control. Likewise, directing a meandering three-hour film is generally indicative that a filmmaker is not entirely clear about or in command of his subject matter. The question tantalizingly raised, but not addressed, by *The Nothing Factory* is why the massive social explosion in Portugal in 1974 did not lead to a social revolution and who was responsible for that failure.

*Sergio and Sergei* by Cuban filmmaker Ernesto Daranas Serrano is set in 1991, as the Gorbachev Stalinist bureaucracy is dissolving the Soviet Union. In Cuba, Sergio (Tomás Cao), a financially hard-pressed philosophy professor and ham radio operator, makes unexpected contact with a stranded Soviet cosmonaut, Sergei Krikalev (Héctor Noas), in deep space. Having been educated in the USSR, the Cuban is able to communicate with the Russian in this charming, semi-comic story. The difficult economic conditions of the Cuban population dominate the movie’s visuals.

Executive producer/actor Ron Perlman told *Deadline Hollywood* that the film was based on an actual event in which a Russian cosmonaut (Krikalev) was sent up to the Mir Space Station just as the USSR was collapsing. He was left in space because the Russian Federation, a product of capitalist restoration, was out of money. Through the intervention of the Cuban’s friend, an American journalist (played by Perlman in the movie), who was being followed at the time by the CIA for exposing the crimes of the Nixon administration, NASA was brought in and rescued the Russian cosmonaut.

In *The China Hustle*, Dan David, a financial whistleblower, former short-seller and predominant voice in the film, informs us, “There are no good guys in this story, including me.” The documentary is directed by Jed Rothstein, with Alex Gibney as executive producer.

According to *Bloomberg*, Rothstein’s movie deals with the reality that the “seeds for a subsequent crisis were sown in a wave of Chinese reverse-mergers on US exchanges in the decade after 2000... Between 2000 and 2011, about 450 Chinese companies listed on US stock exchanges, according to research from the Singapore Management University. By purchasing shell companies and keeping the listing, they could bypass the rigors of an initial public offering.” Acquiring US-listed Chinese companies helped David net a 229 percent return in 2009. The movie points out—with alarm—that President Donald Trump’s general trend is to deregulate.

Involved in the operation were investment bankers, such as Roth Capital Partners, and some of the biggest accounting firms, such as Deloitte Touche and Ernst & Young, as well as advisors, like Rodman & Renshaw, whose public face was the retired general and 2004 contender for the Democratic Party presidential nomination, Wesley Clark.

Rothstein’s *The China Hustle* presents some devastating material about

the post-2008 financial industry and the grotesque swindles (packaging “garbage as gold”) that continue unabated. It is not, however, an anti-capitalist film and, as the title suggests, pushes in a nationalist, anti-Chinese direction—essentially attempting to pin the blame for the ongoing speculative bubbles, brought about by the activities of Wall Street and America’s largest financial institutions, on China!

*To be continued*



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