

LORRAINE HANSBERRY SPEAKS OUT

ART AND THE BLACK REVOLUTION

Selected and edited by Robert Nemiroff

ON BLACK LIBERATION: "The pressure is going to come from twenty million discontented Black people . . . led by a new young Black leadership . . . which has no illusions about the nature of our oppression and will no longer hesitate to condemn not only the results . . . but the causes of it—which is, of course, the present organization of American Society. 1964
"My position is that we have a great deal to be angry about, furious about . . . and I feel . . . that we need all the ideologies which point towards the total liberation of African peoples all over the world." 1959

"We have to find some way to encourage the white liberal to become an American radical! . . . I've never heard Negroes boo the name John Brown." 1964

ON ART: "What we want now is a recognition of the beauty of things African, the beauty of things black . . ." 1959

ON "NON-VIOLENCE": "The whole idea of debating whether or not Negroes should defend themselves is an insult. If anybody comes and does ill in your home or your community, obviously you try your best to kill him . . ." 1964

.....
On January 12, 1965, a little more than a month before the assassination of Malcolm X, Lorraine Hansberry died; she was 34. Somehow it seems like more than coincidence that the two should die within less than a month and a half of each other and scarcely nine months before the 'deferred dream' exploded in the streets of Watts. Each of them possessed an uncommon prescience. They knew that a plague was about to be loosed upon the land and they went down into Egypt and told Pharaoh to let their people go . . .

"The genius of Lorraine Hansberry lies in her ability to meld her revolutionary commitment with her artistic skill and integrity. Her sensitive antennae made her plays seismographs of social upheaval. But few could respond to this element in them, because to respond was to change—And change is a process we are unwilling to begin until our very lives are threatened . . . Now the voice and vision of Lorraine Hansberry needs to be heard. It was there all along but we weren't ready to listen. Now perhaps we are."

—Julius Lester, Introduction to
LES BLANCS: THE COLLECTED LAST
PLAYS OF LORRAINE HANSBERRY

There is a casual myth loose in the land to the effect that Lorraine Hansberry was an establishment artist—a safe Black playwright who graciously accepted the illusions of her time and nation—the main thrust of whose work was to secure for Black folk a respectable slice of the Great American Pie. An artist, in short, who "belongs to a previous era of black-white relations . . . of liberal hope . . . of integration . . . of non-violent witness . . . before"—as *Life Magazine* put it in well-meaning praise (1/14/72)—"the cancers of Viet Nam and separatism ran riotous through the body politic."

Nothing could be further from the truth—as the playwright's own voice and words make clear in this album. Lorraine Hansberry was a revolutionary artist whose very essence was a humanism inseparable from the Black liberation struggle in all its ramifications. An artist, in James Baldwin's words, "on the barricades" whose life and works were witness "to the accumulating thunder of the hooves of horses and the tread of tanks."

"Hers, wrote Clayton Riley, one of today's foremost young Black critics, was "that brilliant, anguished consciousness . . . at work in the long nights of troubled times, struggling to make sense out of an insane situation, aware—way ahead of the rest of us—that there is no compromise with evil." An artist, in short, who presaged and delineated the revolution that was coming and the paramount concerns that were to define it: Black consciousness and identity; Black militance; the inseparability of the American liberation struggle from that in Africa and the

insurgent Third World; refusal to accept the false gods and goals of absorption into the white capitalist value system; and the relation of all of these to total liberation of the human personality and of the world's peoples, its youth, its women, its oppressed and alienated of all races and nations.

All this was manifest in her works from *A Raisin in the Sun* through *Les Blancs*—as viewers and readers have been discovering in increasing numbers under the impact of the growing revival that began with the advent, in 1968, of *To Be Young, Gifted and Black*, an autobiographical portrait in her own words, on the off-Broadway stage and on college campuses throughout the nation. But it is nowhere more apparent than in this album of interviews and speeches recorded during the five years between the triumph of *Raisin* and her death.

SIDE ONE

1. "... THE BEAUTY OF THINGS BLACK—TOWARDS TOTAL LIBERATION"
An interview with TV commentator MIKE WALLACE,
May 8, 1959

The questions posed and the swiftness and candor of the replies in this no-holds-barred interview—taped just after the winning of Broadway's "Best Play of the Year" award—provide a classic example of the mind (and tongue) of Lorraine Hansberry in action. The subjects: her art and world view—*Raisin* as a "protest" play—the Myth of the "Exceptional" Negro—America vs. Black intellect—the Black middle class—Assimilationism—Black nationalism—Anti-semitism—"Total liberation".

2. "... TO RECLAIM THE AFRICAN PAST"
From a radio interview with STUDS TERKEL, May 12, 1959

A discussion of one of the revolutionary aspects of *Raisin*: its introduction into a Chicago ghetto setting of the themes of African culture and liberation through the character Asagai, a Nigerian student revolutionary. (This complete interview, one of her most penetrating on the many aspects of *Raisin*, will be contained in a second Caedmon Hansberry album.)

3. "... INTEGRATION INTO A BURNING HOUSE?"
From a radio symposium on "The Negro Writer in America," Jan. 1, 1961

The mythology of the Civil War and the fate of her "controversial" anti-slavery television play, *The Drinking Gourd*. The impact of Third World revolution on Black writing. (Two excerpts from a Civil War Centennial program that included James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, Nat Hentoff, Alfred Kazin and Emile Capouya.)

SIDE TWO

1. "THE BLACK REVOLUTION AND THE WHITE BACKLASH"
Speech and Remarks at Town Hall, June 15, 1964

Struggling against the cancer that within six months was to take her life, Lorraine rose from a sickbed to participate in the historic Town Hall forum with Imamu Baraka, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, John O. Killens, Paule Marshall, Charles Silberman, David Susskind and James Wechsler, which articulated and foreshadowed the coming split between Black America and the white liberal establishment. The effects of painkillers may be discerned in her tongue in the early phases of the speech in which she set forth the need for a new militancy and a radically new relationship between Blacks and Whites in the freedom struggle.

2. "WE ARE ONE PEOPLE!"
Remarks to a Civil Rights Rally, Croton-on-Hudson, N. Y.,
June 16, 1963

As chairman of a mass meeting to support S.N.C.C., the

playwright referred to the now famous private meeting between Attorney General Robert Kennedy and Black artists and activists in which she had played a key role. Sociologist Kenneth Clark described that meeting as "the most dramatic experience I have ever had . . . a searing, emotional confrontation." When, after several hours of frequently heated discussion, Kennedy had impatiently turned his back on Black student leader Jerome Smith, Lorraine had risen to her feet to speak the words recounted here. A postscript to this climactic moment was provided by James Baldwin:

Lorraine Hansberry said that she understood what Jerome was talking about, the difficulty of being a Negro man, but she was very proud of Negro men and she wasn't worried because they had done really beautifully, all things considered. She said, 'But I am very worried about the state of a civilization which produces that white cop standing on that Negro woman's neck in Birmingham.' And she stood up, and she said, 'Thank you, Mr. Attorney General.' She walked out. And we followed her. And that was that. (American Journey/The Times of Robert Kennedy)

3. "... MY GOVERNMENT IS WRONG!"
From a Speech to a mass meeting to abolish the House
UnAmerican Activities Committee, Manhattan Center,
Oct. 25, 1962

In the climactic hours of the Cuban Missile Crisis—and the framework of continuing McCarthyite repression—the playwright speaks out for peace and civil liberties—and defines the relationship of both to Black liberation.

4. "... TOWARDS A NEW BLACK LEADERSHIP"
Speech on the 15th Anniversary of THE MONTHLY
REVIEW, May 15, 1964

In one of her last public appearances, the playwright left the hospital to join in honoring an independent socialist publication. Portions of her speech were not recorded and the tape quality is poor, but what she stood for was never clearer than in these remarks on the roots of Black oppression, education in the ghetto, the Washington "Civil Rights Game," and, in that light, the need for "a new Black leadership" and the fundamental transformation of American society.

—ROBERT NEMIROFF

SIDE 1

1. "... The Beauty of Things Black—
Towards Total Liberation"
(Interview: Mike Wallace, May 8, 1959)..... 21:34
2. "... To Reclaim the African Past"
(Interview: Studs Terkel, May 12, 1959)..... 4:10
3. "... Integration Into a Burning House?"
(From a radio symposium, Jan. 1, 1961)..... 4:49

SIDE 2

1. "The Black Revolution and the White Backlash"
(Town Hall Forum, June 15, 1964) 10:56
2. "We Are One People!"
(Croton-on-Hudson, New York,
June 16, 1963) 4:16
3. "... My Government is Wrong!"
(Manhattan Center, October 25, 1962) 6:13
4. "... Towards a New Black Leadership"
(Monthly Review anniversary,
May 15, 1964) 8:18

Library of Congress Number 74-752660