

Public Square Bonus Episode 1 Transcript

SPEAKER 1: The Public Theater is.

SPEAKER 2: To me the Public Theater is.

SPEAKER 3: The space that can be filled by real people.

SPEAKER 4: Where I can see bold and experimental theater.

SPEAKER 5: The Public Theater is a gift.

SPEAKER 6: Revolutionary.

SPEAKER 7: Public Theater is like a neighborhood. When you live in a neighborhood or on a block you can go to each other's house, and feel welcome when you walk in. You feel like you're at home. That's what the Public Theater is for me.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: Hello and welcome to Public Square 2.0. My name is Garlia Cornelia Jones, director of innovation and new media at The Public Theater. And I will be your host, your guide, as we relaunch the Public Theater's very own podcast. Public Square 2.0 is a new and exciting opportunity to take a look behind the curtain and embrace the actors, staff, and stories connected to one of the nation's oldest theatrical institutions.

I am so excited to lead the team of artists bringing this work to you. As a Black woman, parent, playwright, and producer, my goal has always been to use theater as a tool for progress, to make space for stories of every stripe. You might have also noticed that I'm a person who stutters, which is something that you will periodically experience as we get to know each other over the course of this podcast. For those of you who are returning listeners, thank you for coming back and continuing this journey with us. And for all of you first time audience members, don't worry. You don't need to listen to previous episodes first. But I think you should anyway. They're pretty dope. Even if I am a bit biased.

As part of our new season we will, from time to time bring you shorter audio only bonus episodes. These periodic pockets of audio will exist as another opportunity for you to get to know us. Our first bonus episode is a special one to me. But let's be real, I think all of this is pretty damn special.

Last fall the acclaimed director Robert O'Hara led a bold new vision of classic American theater in the recounting of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. As part of its run in the Newman we held several post-show conversations. This episode focuses on one with two incredible Black women, Dr. Imani Perry and Tracy Heather Strain. But first I should provide you with a little context.

For those of you that have never been to the Public Theater, our building sits on Lafayette Street near Astor Place in New York's Lower East Side. Once you come up the stairs, or ramp and through our entrance, you'll notice that we don't just have one performance space. The Public Theater is home to five individual performance venues, not including Joe's Pub, a world class cabaret and concert space.

This production of *A Raisin in the Sun* was being presented on the stage of the historic Newman, home to so many pivotal Public Theater productions. *A Chorus Line*, *Caroline or Change*, and of course *Hamilton*. Post-show conversations are not entirely unique, but there was something different about this one. Miss Strain was actually not in the theater, but sitting on a laptop next to Dr. Perry, inside that now all too ubiquitous black and gray Zoom window.

This was the first time we'd ever attempted something like this. It was a little nerve-wracking, but we got it done. And while it took us a bit of extra logistical effort, our two panelists were more than capable of

adapting. Currently the Hughes Rogers professor of African-American Studies at Princeton University, and a faculty associate with the programs in law and public affairs, gender and sexuality studies, and jazz studies, Dr. Imani Perry is the author of six books, including the award winning *Looking for Lorraine: The Radiant and Radical Life of Lorraine Hansberry*.

Tracy Heather Strain is the Corwin-Fuller professor of film studies and associate professor of film studies at Wesleyan University. A two time Peabody award winning and Emmy nominated filmmaker, and the writer, director, and producer of the film *Sighted Eyes, Feeling Heart*, a feature documentary about Lorraine Hansberry.

Let me set the scene. As we drop in, I am on the stage of the Newman with my eight-year-old son standing next to me, acting as my assistant. Dr. Perry is on the stage with Professor Strain next to her, a laptop placed on a music stand, looking out into the house. You'll also hear me mention a statue at Astor Place. This piece entitled *To Sit a While* by Alison Saar, toured the country as part of the Lorraine Hansberry Initiative, residing momentarily at Astor Place from October 1 through the 21st, just after opening night of our production.

More information and media can be found in the show notes at PublicTheater.org. OK, that's enough from me. Here's a portion of this conversation in partnership with the Lorraine Hansberry Initiative from Friday, October 21, 2022. Enjoy.

This evening. You have in your program, useful here. Can you hold this? This is my assistant, and child. So my other one is over there. In your program you have both of the bios of our two participants Dr. Imani Perry, who is here. Who we've done a lot of things over.

IMANI PERRY: Lots together.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: The Zoom over the last couple of years, which is very exciting. So it was nice to see you in person, and Tracy. Tracy Heather Strain who is here, and also here. And so without further ado, I'm going to let them take-- take it away. I will just note on your way out of the theater make sure to pass Haster Place, and Lorraine Hansberry, we have the statue that has been a big part of this initiative is there, and actually leads tomorrow, and you can also find out more information on the initiative in your show email too. So thank you so much and without further ado, take it away.

IMANI PERRY: Thank you.

[APPLAUSE]

Can you see? And so I do want to ask one favor. Will you tell me when it's time for us to stop, because my phone died? So we just saw this extraordinary, extraordinary production of *Raisin in the Sun*. Just, I am almost speechless, but called to speak at this moment. So I'll figure out something to say. Was absolutely gorgeous in every way. And I wonder if maybe what we could talk about to begin with is why this work is so resilient.

I mean, it is this many decades later still has the power to bring-- it brought me to tears, to inspire, to move deeply. I mean, and for folks when you haven't read Tracy Heather Strain is the filmmaker of the absolutely extraordinary documentary *Sighted Eyes, Feeling Heart*, about Lorraine Hansberry's life. Every one, if you haven't seen it, you must see it. So yeah, what do you think it is?

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: It's so weird. I can hear myself echo. I think Lorraine was such an extraordinary writer. She really-- she was writing from her life experience, what she witnessed in Chicago. And she was so smart. And she was-- she just really captured the African-American experience, the

aspects of it that remains so deeply entrenched in our society, that everyone still can relate to it. I saw-- I was able to see the Williamstown production of this in 2019.

So I obviously haven't seen this production, but it is a beautiful production. The director has done a wonderful job, and but also brought a modernness to the production that I saw that I really appreciated. And so I just think she was extraordinarily insightful about people and society and African-Americans. And the racism doesn't go away, right?

IMANI PERRY: Doesn't go away, right. And one of the things in that we had had multiple conversations about over the years is part of what makes the story so profound is that-- and Lorraine's ability to capture was that her own family was not like one her family was like that of the Murchison family. She came-- so she came of age in a relatively Bourgeois middle class in a way that in the context of the Great Depression in which she is born was rich. And her father was known as the Kitchenette King. He was actually the person who was sort of separating up apartments and providing-- let me step back. The majority of Chicago's South Side was covered. A majority of Chicago is covered by racially restrictive covenants, meaning Black people could not move into the city. Thousands of migrants were coming North, and they have no place to live. And so it was necessary to create spaces. And so these apartments were cut up in smaller and smaller pieces, and was what reduced the ghettoization of Chicago.

So the decision to center a family that was representative, I think, is precisely the kind of brilliance that you're talking about. She witnessed it from not from a position of being economically vulnerable, but also, as you said, experienced the violence of Chicago racism. And the final scene, the decision of the director to make clear that where they were going in Clybourne Park was going to be a place where they encountered violent racism is both comes from her own experience, and maybe we can talk about that, and also was a representative experience when they were literally hundreds of acts of mob violence in response to Black people moving into predominantly white neighborhoods in Chicago.

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: Right, and yeah, going off of that in terms of specifically her family, making that move for the Hansberry family to move to a previously all white street. It was part of a strategy. And so that's the other thing that I think is so interesting about Lorraine Hansberry, that she's just not-- she has seen this an example set by her father of activism. And so as a young girl they moved to this previously all white street, and they face violence and intimidation.

And even though her dad ends up winning a Supreme Court case, and it's a planned case with insurance people and other leaders interested in opening up more homes to African-Americans on the South side of Chicago. She realizes that-- she decides for herself that art is the way. That she'd seen her dad fighting this legal way. And basically it killed him. And she decides that art is going to be her vehicle for trying to make change. And I think that that is what's so interesting about this play, is that she really saw this play as a protest play.

IMANI PERRY: Yeah, and just to echo your point, she talked about her father and used all of his gifts and his intellect and did everything the right way. Right? He litigated this case, and Hansberry, for me, if you take constitutional law and law school, you read that case 1940 all the way up to the Supreme Court. And she said, and the problem was, even after they won, the South side of Chicago was just as segregated as it had been before. Right? And this is not-- I think part of the reason this story resonates to this day is that we still live with residential segregation.

We still live with deep inequalities, and so the point that she was making, that there's something that even the kind of-- to transform the kind of broken heartedness. And she talked about her father dying a bitter man. He had decided to move the family to Mexico, and that is the country in the end of his-- and died unexpectedly. But to try another path. Art. And becoming a political radical, and you can talk a little bit about that. She pointed out the same politics as her parents.

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: Right, I mean like a lot of African-Americans at that time, her dad was a Republican. And Hansberry, hanging out on the South side with a stoop and a kitchenette, meeting different kinds of people, and all sorts of people had to live together on the South side of Chicago. So you had very wealthy people, they owned insurance companies and stores, and someone like Carl Hansberry, her father, who owned buildings.

But you also had the people that were working at the meatpacking places, and all sorts of people. Right? And some of those people were radicals. And there is a specific couple that she befriended and started-- this guy had been a radical in Wisconsin. And moved here, and she befriended this couple. And he started opening her eyes to another way of seeing the world.

I also think her own personality was such is that she was very sensitive. She was the last of four children. She was seven years separated from her sister, who is quite the beauty queen and type of girl, and Lorraine was a bookish girl. And so it was-- I think that she just, she was compassionate and as a watcher and and what used to go with her dad to collect rents, and sometimes would advocate on behalf of people who couldn't pay their rents. And things like that.

So she was very sensitive to the human condition. And people who were trying to make it in this world, against all sorts of odds.

IMANI PERRY: And you know, and I think that part of what the-- I think the genius of the play is that, there are-- it's so potent emotionally. You get all of that sensitivity. And there's all of these details, and you mentioned the insurance company. And the detail of the insurance check is an accurate detail for working class and poor Black folks on Chicago's South Side. They mostly worked in jobs where you wouldn't have access to Social Security.

And so because of the very deliberately racist way that Social Security was written into the federal government, and so the only way to have any resources at the end of someone's life was these insurance checks. That depended on someone dying. And Truman Gibson would create it, and found it's a pretty life, and Liberty Insurance Company was worked closely with Carl Hansberry, but provided access to possibility of some into-the-light resources.

So all of the fact that Anitha was going to be a doctor. There was a new medical program and it opened in Chicago Circle Campus that was recruiting Black students. And she had Walter being a chauffeur, was a common job there. And it was discussed extensively in the WPA Negro in Illinois Project. All of those details of people's lives were so carefully wrought, and yet it doesn't feel that way because of the sensitivity, the texture of the characters and the emotional.

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: Yeah, I like something that you said in the film. When I would like to say that one of the reasons that the film has been as successful as it was or has been is because of Imani Perry's presence in it. And you talked about how she created characters. She had characters, these strong characters, but she had really beautiful characterizations too. So people weren't just the maid, the chauffeur, but they had distinct personalities. And they were often based on her relatives.

So while it's true this wasn't her family, because they were more like the Murchurson's, the characters were like different people in the family. And when I interviewed Douglas Turner Ward, I'll never forget it. We were talking about Raisin and he goes, when he met her brother Perry Hansberry, he was like, that cat, he was Walter Lee. You know? That he knew right where-- like there were something that she captured in for the Sidney Poitier's character was he saw it immediately as soon as he met Perry Hansberry. And I always thought that was so interesting.

IMANI PERRY: No relation, although people think Perry was her mother's maiden name, and I tried to find evidence that we were related. We are not. Do you think we should open to some questions?

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: Yeah, this is.

SPEAKER 8: Thank you, yes. I don't want to necessarily start off with this question, but I suppose I will. That I first read this play 30 years ago in high school, and it moved me so greatly. I wanted to ask about the character Joseph as a guy. I think that's remarked upon less in the play but I'm not sure exactly when the play was first premiered. I think the early 1960s.

IMANI PERRY: '59.

SPEAKER 8: '59. OK.

IMANI PERRY: On Broadway.

SPEAKER 8: On Broadway. So that made his speech towards the end quite prescient, where he talks about going back to Nigeria, and how he will fight for this country in its independence, but then also have to contend with what may come of that. And of course, you had the rise of General Sani Abacha, and as Wole Soyinka, described so movingly, as somebody who spent seven years in solitary confinement as a result of that regime. That I don't think that that particular character is remarked upon enough.

IMANI PERRY: Did you email them?

[CROWD CHATTERS]

SPEAKER 9: Something about that.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: Could you hear Tracy there?

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: I only heard-- just where the Asa guy character came from? Is that the short about.

SPEAKER 9: Yeah, where he came from, and also about his kind of prescients in anticipating sort of what the post-colonial condition would be like.

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: OK, so I'll catch some and you can finish. You can take the next one. So first of all, Lorraine went to the University of Wisconsin. And so she met a range of students there, including African students. But her uncle was Leo Hansberry, and he is considered a pioneer in African Studies. And he was at, among other places, he's best known for being at Howard University. He used to come to the Hansberry home, and he would bring people to the house. So she was meeting Africans who would become leaders in different countries as a young woman. So she had firsthand experience with African activists. So you wanted to pick it up from there?

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: Yeah, I mean so for example, her Uncle Leo taught Nnamdi Azikiwe, mentored him. And so and a number of other independents. People-- young people who would be independents are one of the things that I mean among the things that we don't talk about enough is how much HBCU's were sort of institutions that were educating Black people from across the globe. And so these really sort of complicated international spaces for deep political engagement.

And so he, just to illustrate how much of a pioneer he was, he studied W.E.B. Du Bois met Leo Hansberry when he was a student at Berlin University, got him into Harvard for graduate school. He couldn't get a PhD because there was no one there how could examine him. They didn't have anyone who had enough confidence to actually evaluate him.

And he is really sort of built the field in a way that is different from the kind of area studies, imperialist logic, but really sort of-- and so he was so deeply connected and we see this in her political interests. So in many ways my argument is that people talk about Benita is the representation of her in ways, younger her. I think just bastardized representation of intellectual Hansberry, and the kinds of questions that he-- and she's thinking about questions about independence, primarily.

Really in many ways, you think about her intellectual life in the '50s, she's actually more thoughtful about what's happening in the kind of anti-colonial movements than in the southern movement until SNCC right? Until she starts to get excited about organizing in the South and its shifting. So it's reflective of the kind of question she's raising, and she's thinking of-- and also thinking about what's happening in Latin America, right? So she has this kind of internationalist politic. And so anticipating and think like many were, trying to imagine how quickly. And it was prescient, but it also anticipated how quickly the forces of empire were going to try to sort of reach into visions of independence.

And she'd experienced the McCarthyism directly. She'd been saying this really quickly, because she she'd been sent by Paul Robeson to an international peace conference in Uruguay that was left-- with a contentious leftist conference. In the early 50s, and Robeson and W.E.B. Du Bois had had their passports revoked already in the midst of McCarthyism. They were both mentors of hers.

She was sent and her passport was revoked when she came back. So she was a known leftist. She was being followed by the FBI in the early '50s. In fact, they came, they checked out the-- Erla, who was it, in Maven when they came to see--

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: I think it was Philadelphia.

IMANI PERRY: Yeah, they came and reported on them, they said doesn't look too subversive, so but also. But then when it became popular, the FBI was like, we should probably like relax on following her around, because this play is popular, and we'll look like bad guys.

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: Yeah, yeah, they would look like bad guys, yeah. I also want to add that a lot I think African-Americans-- the African-American press was also very international. So people, just regular people were reading more international news. And Hansberry, like a lot of people, saw herself as part of a world majority. So she looked out in the world and saw all these brown and Black people and other colors, let's say, quote, she's like, we are the majority and we need to stick together.

And so not only were the Black campuses more very international, and remain so today, but more so, I would say, in the past in terms of the student consciousness. And but the papers that people were reading.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: So one-- almost--

SPEAKER 10: Of the playbill and I see that plant has thorns in it? What's like, an inspiration on the plant, and what type of plant was it?

IMANI PERRY: And that's-- I think I actually don't know. I think that was the question is about the plant. And that's great. I mean I think there's a symbolism to the plant, but I'm not sure which is about the idea of sort of growth and sustain, but I don't know about the particular design of the-- yeah. Is there anybody else in the house, wants to-- We can ask actors.

SPEAKER 11: [INAUDIBLE] Is the principals being like, what is the plant exactly? That [INAUDIBLE].

IMANI PERRY: I think, well, I think it's subject to interpretation. But it really thinks it's supposed to be a sign of sustaining growth, in the face of an environment that stunts one's growth. You know? So she tends to it all of these years despite the conditions under which to expect to love.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: It expresses me, and she says that I forget.

IMANI PERRY: Yes, yeah. It's not much, yes. Gladstone.

SPEAKER 12: So I was very drawn to the title character, and that really hit me. Struck me deeply. My question for both of you is, [INAUDIBLE] Does the character who resonated most with you change, or who is it in the story that is [INAUDIBLE]

IMANI PERRY: Did you hear that? Which character-- does the character who resonates most with you change? And if not, or who, is that which character most deeply resonates with you.

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: Oh, you know what's so funny? I don't have-- I actually don't have a favorite character, because I think I was so immersed in making the film for so long that I just feel really can't erase the character that I connect most with. I was thinking about her on and off for over 14 years, and even before that. And so I think it's really Hansberry. So I mean if you think of Benitha being a sort of representative of Hansberry, one represent, I could say that. But it's really her, and her genius, and other things that I know about her that aren't in the play.

And things about the play that aren't in my-- I mean yeah. That aren't in my film too. Like they went to Chicago, and that didn't-- I couldn't get that in the film, but the trial in Chicago. And just how tenacious Bill Rose was to get this made, and I just admire how smart she is, and how her life connects with so many major movements that were occurring during her lifetime. It's like, it's amazing how she could speak almost on anything. She was so well-read when we had to read her letters. We would have to do extra research to figure out what is she talking about. Part of it was the.

IMANI PERRY: Literary references, political-- yeah. I would just I would echo that. It is her. But I spend a lot of time and I'm still thinking about that moment, because Ruth is really the quietest character. When she says it's my time, I feel like I've spent like 10 years thinking about that sentence. And because I think part of Hansberry's genius is that the minor characters are never wasted. In many ways they're like the linchpin of the text. And so I don't have an answer to that, but there's something that really gets me about the sort of self-sacrificing, long suffering, but in that moment, she's insists on something for herself. That seems really profound.

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: Yeah. That's true. I like that. Ruth is an amazing character. Also based on the family members.

IMANI PERRY: Who was she based on? Who was she based on?

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: I think she's based on Carrie. That was Perry's wife.

IMANI PERRY: Oh.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: OK. With that thank you all so much thank. You Tracy.

TRACY HEATHER STRAIN: Bye. Good to see you. Bye, thank you everybody.

GARLIA CORNELIA JONES: Thank you so much for joining us for this a very first bonus episode as part of Public Square 2.0. Next time on the Public Square we welcome Tony nominated director Robert O'Hara himself to talk about his production of A Raisin in the Sun, along with Joi Gresham, director of the Lorraine Hansberry Literary Trust. Thank you so much for joining us and we'll meet you right back here Thursdays at The Public Square.

JUSTIN SLOAN: Today's episode of Public Square 2.0 was hosted and produced by Garlia Cornelia Jones, Director of Innovation and New Media at The Public Theater with support from New Media Associate, Emily White. Creative Production, includes story support by John Sloan III of GhostLight Creative Productions. Audio production by Justin K. Sloan of GhostLight Creative Productions
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