

A Performance Review of *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*

Lorraine Hansberry, Playwright

Anne Kauffman, Director

The Brooklyn Academy of Music, Harvey Theatre, Brooklyn, NY

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The Brooklyn Academy of Music's (BAM) Spring 2023 production of Lorraine Hansberry's *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window*, directed by Anne Kauffman, showcases the playwright's talent for elucidating the ways in which political and social ideals are mitigated by the particular positionality of uniquely human experiences. Kauffman's production is the first major sustained revival of the play in New York City since the Broadway premiere in 1963 and transferred to Broadway for a limited run in the Spring and Summer of 2023. The production stars Oscar Isaac as Sidney Brustein and Rachel Brosnahan as Iris Parodus Brustein. Their movie and television stardoms are undoubtedly part of the draw and a seeming necessity of large-scale theatre economics. The production is consistently engaging, and while Hansberry's work here lacks the tidiness of her most well-known play, the timely indictment of the ways liberal self-absorption and sanctimoniousness prevent radical change and lead to personal tragedy proves a useful challenge to an often-self-congratulatory liberal audience. The production adds to the ongoing reassessment of Hansberry, encouraging audiences to understand her aesthetic and political legacy beyond often simplified readings of *Raisin in the Sun*.

Set in Greenwich Village in the early 1960s, the action takes place primarily in the Brustein apartment. While Iris is struggling to work as an actress, Sidney shifts between jobs. The set was created by the design collective "dots", and the space is tightly packed, but not cluttered, feeling large, but not spacious, and full but not messy. The effect is not naturalism, but one that does feel confined. Furthering this effect, the apartment sits in a larger world where audience members can see the cast walk the streets outside. The world is large on a physical scale, however, there feels like little room to be alone. The marriage, thus, is firmly nestled in a social world with others constantly popping in and out of the apartment. As the play begins, Sidney takes over a local newspaper and is soon supporting his friend Wally's (played by Andy Grotelueschen) bid to defeat machine politics as a local-level candidate. Alton (played by Julian De Niro), a light-skinned Black man, seems to be a regular fixture in the household and wants to marry Iris's sister Gloria (played by Gus Birney), not knowing she is a sex worker. Intruding in the "bohemian" world of the play is Iris's other sister, uptown housewife Mavis (played by Miriam Silverman). Finally, Sidney seems rueful of upstairs neighbor David's (played by Glenn Fitzgerald) absurdist plays and their larger philosophy. Raphael Nash Thompson rounds out the cast as Max. In the second half of the play, Wally is revealed as a fraud, Alton finds out about Gloria's profession and leaves her, and David finds success as a playwright. Iris intends to

separate from Sidney, and Gloria, finding out that Alton is leaving, kills herself. The play ends with Sidney and Iris attempting to reconcile and communally build a better future.

The performances are strong throughout, with Isaac, Brosnahan, and Silverman standing out. Isaac's work centers the play with an intense energy, charming his guests and his wife. His physical magnetism is a tool he uses to attempt to quell Iris's complaints about their relationship, often physically caressing her when confronted with any sort of conflict. His eagerness to have Iris dance and play the part of whom he refers to in the play as his "mountain girl" points to his sexism. So too does the ease with which this charm turns to cutting anger when he feels Iris oversteps or threatens his worldview. Underscoring the sexism in the home, Kauffman stages Brosnahan's Iris as always working. She is constantly cleaning, preparing food, putting away groceries, and engaging in other household tasks that center her labor in the home, labor that Sidney does not notice or help with. The fracturing of the relationship provides a center to the play, and Brosnahan's reduced stage time in the second half is deeply felt. To highlight the fracture, Kauffman stages a conversation between Iris and Sidney (scripted with both on the fire escape) with him on the roof and her on the apartment couch. The physical distance evocatively mirrors the growing rift but also makes it somewhat unclear how real the conversation is and how much it is Iris imaging a communion she cannot have. This contrasts with the closing moments, which start with Iris sitting in stark pale light and moves to the two embracing on the couch in warm light, moving physically into a new reality after having been estranged and then made to face a literal harsh light of day.



Figure 1, Rachel Brosnahan (Iris Parodus Bruestein) and Oscar Isaac (Sidney Bruestein). Photo Credit: Julieta Cervantes.

Sidney is indicative of most of the characters in that his seeming progressivism clashes with his disregard for his own wife. The lack of empathy is made stunningly clear by Mavis, in two scenes where she points first to the lack of acceptance and kindness by the bohemians, and then to the way her own life is more complex and sexually atypical than Sidney assumes. She concludes "Everyone is his own hipster." Mavis appears to turn Sidney's, and by association the audience's, presumptions on how people live their lives on their ear, but then exits espousing casual racism and antisemitism, leaving her, like all the others, a morally and socially ambivalent figure. The rousing applause on Mavis's second exit made me question if many in the audience had seen her figure as less complex than her biases make her. In Hansberry's play, identity remains complexly positioned, and sympathy for others is not guaranteed by one's own suffering.

The play showcases how easily available societal biases are when there is a need to hurt



Figure 2, Julian De Niro (Alton) and Miriam Silverman (Mavis).
Photo Credit: Julieta Cervantes.

someone or protect yourself. During a dinner scene, Iris engages in casual racism before Alton and David trade racist and homophobic barbs in their personal disagreement. Later, when Alton finds out that Gloria is a sex worker, he berates Sidney for not telling him, and offers up a chilling history of how Black bodies have been trafficked and sold, and that his own light skin is a testament to the ways in which Black bodies have been abused, concluding by referring to Gloria as “the

white man’s leavings.” Similarly, the playwright in the play, David, offers that he does not judge Gloria's profession, but does ask her to sit in a room to give comfort to a queer man who will not have sex with David without a woman present. This comes as Gloria increasingly feels that her sexuality is her only value. Sidney, so dejected by Wally's fraud, fails to meaningfully comfort her. All of these men fail to find meaningful connections or sympathy with Gloria. As her last moments play out on stage, Iris, Mavis, and Alton sit in chairs in front of the stage, observing her, and potentially aligning them with the audience's own gaze. Kauffman uses this theatrical metaphor to visualize the judgmental pressure Gloria feels. As the stage devolves into a world of color and sound, partly from the noises of Village residents ignorantly celebrating Wally's victory, the play enters not only a mini-absurdist staging but we are trapped inside the pressurized deterioration of Gloria's mind. Even in this progressive world, the pressure and lack of empathy are deadly.

In Kauffman's expression of Hansberry's work, political conviction is often bound up with personal ambitions and challenges. The revival comes amidst a resurgence of interest in Hansberry, with multiple major biographies, a documentary, a piece of sculpture (on display in BAM's lobby for the run of the show), and a recent revival of *Raisin in the Sun* at the Public Theatre in New York City. Kauffman and her team clearly render Hansberry's balance between the need for progressives to take a long look in the mirror and the need for action. The highly visible production centers Hansberry's vision for the need for coalition, understanding, and empathy to reshape the world.

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