

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Likely/Unlikely Pairing

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 28th, 2018

At first glance, the two shows currently on stage at Pasadena's A Noise Within (ANW) would seem to be an odd coupling. Shakespeare's *King Henry V* (abbreviated to *Henry V*) and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin In the Sun* would not appear to be closely related. But the group name for this first part of ANW's 2018 season being "Entertaining Courage," you can find plenty of courage in both plays. And you certainly can find the double meaning of *entertaining* in both of them as well.

(Michael Frayn's comedy *Noises Off* follows in April with yet another brand of courage — the courage of the poor actor condemned to walk out on the stage in a production that he or she *knows* is a foregone disaster; abundant laughs in that one.)

You also can pretty much count on ANW's rotating repertory seasons to deliver at least one intriguing king every few months — and the occasional intriguing queen. In Shakespeare's hands, most of these rulers rarely make boring monarchs. Looking over the past few years, you'll find that ANW provided Julius Caesar, King Lear, Macbeth, Richard III and even Henry IV. But if memory serves, not until this year did they venture to give audiences a Henry V. Yes, he's that same Prince Hal who, as a very young man, was the bane of his father's existence by choosing to hang out with his buddy John Falstaff, mostly in taverns generously equipped with ale, wenches, brawlers and other ruffians. At least in Shakespeare's world.



Rafael Goldstein as King Henry V at A Noise Within.

That Prince Hal is the perceived wastrel who surprised everybody by maturing into Henry V, a warrior King of England and (as Shakespeare's *Henry* goes to some fictional lengths to tell us) King of France. Historically, Henry never reigned over France because he died of dysentery a couple of months before that event was to be formalized. But that is hardly the point. Shakespeare wrote *plays*, not *histories*. The histories were there to serve the playwright who could turn true stories into fabulous ones. And so he did.

Frederica Nascimento has produced an austere set for this production — a grey step pyramid that conveniently splits in half and moves with ease on the otherwise empty stage. Rotating repertory demands accommodation and ANW does it well for having done it for more than 25 years. Angela Balogh Calin has produced costumes that wittily signify any and no particularly identifiable historical period. This Henry hoists a gun, smokes cigarettes and wears Ray Ban shades even as his soldiers fight with swords and shields.



Kasey Mahaffy up top, above a warring ensemble in *Henry V* at A Noise Within.

And how about the pacing? Artistic Co-Directors Julia Rodriguez Elliott and Geoff Elliott, having trimmed, tightened and gently restructured the play (to commendable effect), have jointly turned this *Henry V* into a whirlwind event peopled by members of its strong core company of regulars, who understand the drill and the bluster and chaos of war. *But* . . . the directors have also injected an interpretive surprise by delivering not just the warrior King, but a moody one — expertly portrayed by company stalwart Rafael Goldstein — as a wise man who knows enough to be a reluctant commander in chief.

Goldstein's performance is the most entrancing aspect of this *Henry V*. His Henry is no laggard, coward or nobleman who shies away from his regal responsibilities. But he's an inward man, a man of intelligence and feeling who has no desire to send his soldiers to almost certain death, even as he knows he must. He knows the odds, he knows his men are tired and outnumbered — and stranded on foreign soil. But Henry also knows the fight is unavoidable, and raises himself up against all odds to stir a passion and a thirst for victory in his ragtag troops with some of Shakespeare's most exhortatory speeches ("Once more into the breach..." and the unrivalled St. Crispin's call to arms — speeches that have been embraced by other writers and film-makers who knew that they could write no better ones).

Battle scenes on stage are another story, however. They're rarely persuasive and the ones here are no exception, but they'll do. It's chiefly in the battle's aftermath that both the production and Goldstein shine. With an inscrutable demeanor he asks about the number of enemy dead and learns it's in the thousands. But when inquiring after the English casualties and hearing they're far fewer, he does a slow crumble to the ground in relief and disbelief. It's one of those moments that makes a play worth seeing — and Goldstein embodies its full value.



Rafael Goldstein as Henry V in *Henry V* at A Noise Within.

Nor does he shortchange us in the love scene that follows. Henry woos his royal bride, the French princess Katherine (Erika Soto), with the bone-weariness, languor, excitement and broken French of a king who feels his sadness and fatigue as much as his hopes. The scene is, as it has always been, one of Shakespeare's least expected and most delicious. But what the Elliotts Squared have in store for the play's ending is a shocker. And it's a shocker that is steeped in the real history.

I will not spoil it for you.



l-r: Tony Turner, Ben Cain, Bert Emmett and Sarah Hollis in *A Raisin In the Sun* at A Noise Within.

THE OTHER PLAY running concurrently with *Henry V* is Lorraine Hansberry's best-known, *A Raisin In the Sun*. While the world has changed and the play's realism is by now stylistically dated (it had its Broadway opening in 1959, and was the first play by an African American woman to be produced on Broadway), bigotry, it seems, never changes and never goes away. *Raisin*, on the other hand, continues to find favor and recognition in translations and productions all over the world.

Based on an experience that played a role in Hansberry's young life, it is a play about housing

discrimination, but really a good deal more than that. Let's say it's about dreams deferred and dreams shattered in an implacably racist climate. The Younger family hopes to move from cramped rented quarters into a house in a white enclave on the strength of a dead father's life insurance proceeds — only to find that they're not wanted there and, as if that were not bad enough, that Walter Lee's hoped-for new business partner has unforgivably betrayed him.



l-r: Sandra McClain & Ben Cain in *A Raisin In the Sun* at A Noise Within.

Directed by Gregg T. Daniel, the ANW production is solid, even if its emotional temperature never rises quite to the levels it demands. Ben Cain, who plays Walter, has the hunger, anger and frustration the role exacts, but at some expense to the sensitive edge that is also required if his pain is to be visible enough to break our hearts. We do see it, but we don't always feel it.

The real winner in this cast is Sandra McClain's Lena, the widowed matriarch of the Younger family and singular owner of that inherited money. Her good intentions and love of family never waver, even when severely tested by forces beyond her control. Her shattering, strong performance compels us and also reminds us of what we too often miss among the other members of the company.



Sandra McClain as the matriarch in *A Raisin in the Sun* at A Noise Within.

Daniel, who staged a memorable production of Hansberry's *Les Blancs* some nine months ago in Hollywood, was reaching for something of that caliber here. But *Les Blancs*, Hansberry's last play and arguably her best, signaled a new political phase in her own development as a playwright. She died at 34 of pancreatic cancer. *A Raisin In the Sun* was a strong early step in a career that held nothing but a promise that we'll never get to know.

Top image: Ensemble in Henry V at A Nose Within.

All photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: *Henry V* & *A Raisin In the Sun*

WHERE: A Noise Within, 3352 East Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107.

HOW: **Single Tickets** start at \$25. **Student rush** with ID, \$20, one hour before any performance depending on availability. **Groups (10 or more)** – Adults from \$25, Students from \$18. Youth discount, ages 17 and under, \$14 off regular price. **Sunday Rush, April 1 & 8, 7 pm only.** All remaining tickets: \$25 after 2 pm, day of performance, cash or credit, at the box office.

WHEN:

- **HENRY V**

April 1, 2 & 7pm (*Sunday Rush*, 7pm performance only); April 5, 7:30pm; April 6, 8pm

- **A RAISIN IN THE SUN**

Today, 7:30pm; March 30, 8pm; March 31, 2 & 8pm; April 7, 2 & 8pm. April 8, 2 & 7pm.

You also may check schedule, availability and prices at **626-356-3100 ext. 1** or at www.anoisewithin.org

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