

SPELMAN Messenger



Fantastic Four

40 Under 40 Phenomenal Women

**Fierce and fabulous
Spelman alumnae**

*Pictured (left to right) are
Ashley Lamothe, LaDonna
Boyd, Karen Fields-Lever and
Fallon Wilson*

THE 'SIGHTED EYES AND FEELING HEART' OF LORRAINE HANSBERRY

BY KIA SMITH, C'2004

A seminal work in American literature, Lorraine Hansberry's "A Raisin in the Sun" tells the timeless story of a Black family attempting to establish themselves financially while combating racism in society and dealing with ongoing familial conflict. The award-winning play, which was critically and commercially successful at its release, premiered on Broadway in 1959. Since then, "A Raisin in the Sun" has been reproduced a number of times: on Broadway, off-Broadway, as film, and in community theaters.

While most Americans are familiar with Hansberry's work via these productions, or as a staple in high school curriculum, little is known about the life of Hansberry, who died of cancer at the age of 35 in 1965. Writer and director Tracy Heather Strain is changing that. With the release of her 2017 documentary, "Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart," Strain tells the story of Hansberry in such a beautiful and intriguing way that viewers are certain to walk away with undaunting admiration for Hansberry as a writer, an activist and a woman.

Strain was introduced to Hansberry's work 40 years ago at a community theater production of "To Be Young, Gifted, and Black," an off-Broadway production adapted from Hansberry's letters, interviews, and journal entries in 1968. "She entered my consciousness, and stayed there," Strain shared. "After college, I saw a lot of independent films, and something just came into me. I wanted to make a film about Lorraine Hansberry, and I wasn't even a filmmaker."

Strain began making "Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart" in 2004. Upon concluding her 14-year filmmaking journey, she screened the film to over 100 students and faculty members at Spelman College April 23, a treat for students who are studying in the College's new documentary filmmaking program.

"I love it," said author, activist and Spelman College alumna Alice Walker, one of four panelists who participated in a post-screening discussion with the Spelman community. Joining Strain and Walker on the panel were filmmaker and Distinguished Professor in the Arts Julie Dash and actress LaTanya Richardson Jackson, C'75, who narrated "Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart."

"I was struck by the brilliance of her mind and how [she] was ahead of her time," shared Jackson. And that brilliance comes across in Strain's film,

which paints Hansberry as a paradox whose person and work appear safe, but beneath the surface neither play nor playwright is safe or unthreatened. Hansberry used her work and her voice to challenge racism. At a meeting between Robert Kennedy and Black cultural leaders that included James Baldwin, Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne and others, Hansberry is quoted as telling Kennedy, "You are the best of what White America can offer us. If you can't hear what we're saying, then we don't have any hope," according to friends.

"Sighted Eyes/Feeling Heart" explores Hansberry's complex life, delving into her childhood and showing how it influenced and shaped her future art and activism. In addition to using Hansberry's personal papers, home movies, and rare photos to tell the story of her life, Strain interviewed family, friends and colleagues, leaving viewers with a portrait of a self-confident

Hansberry who was committed to advocating for her community through story and voice. Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, Harry Belafonte, and her sister, Mamie Hansberry, all appear in the film. For more information, visit sightedeyesfeelingheart.com.



Writer and director Tracy Heather Strain spent 14 years creating "Sighted Eyes."

Kia Smith, C'2004, is a writer, music fan, culture freak and communications consultant.



Pictured (left to right) are Julie Dash, LaTanya Richardson Jackson, Alice Walker, President Mary Schmidt Campbell, Tracy H. Strain and Beverly Guy Sheftall, C'66, the Anna Julia Cooper Professor of Women's Studies and founding director of the Spelman College Women's Research and Resource Center.



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