A Raisin in the Sun

Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. Students will most likely describe some signs of poverty in the inner city of Chicago in 1959: mostly African Americans families and other minorities and poor whites, run-down apartment buildings, overcrowded housing conditions, few yards, trees, or landscaping. They may not imagine several families sharing a bathroom or shower and even a telephone line. Most will picture families with few electronics or appliances to make life easier as they struggle to feed, clothe, and educate their families. Some typical problems encountered might be daily frustrations due to poverty, illness, anger, alcoholism, drug addiction, violence, and crime, as well as rat and cockroach infestations. However, students will also be able to imagine the fierce hopes that most will have as they try to end the cycle of poverty and improve the lives and opportunities for their children.

2. When people have been betrayed by someone they trusted or have had their "dreams deferred," many will lash out in anger and frustration. Others may experience disbelief and denial or may want revenge. Students will recognize how tempting it is to seek escapes through alcohol or illicit drugs. Many will also realize that people can eventually feel beaten down and may be ready to give up unless they have some support and reasons to hope or to change.

3. Many students have had experience with several generations living under the same roof and will recognize that conflicts may arise from different values and expectations. Often the older generations may be more cautious or set in their ways and the younger ones may be impatient to wait for changes or to realize their dreams. The older ones are often accustomed to being in charge and making decisions, and the younger ones may resent such control and reluctance to take chances. However, as some students will have discovered, the younger can often benefit from their elders' wisdom, reflection, and experience, and the elders can benefit from their children's energy, creative problem solving, and idealism.

4. If students have read Lorraine Hansberry's play, they will easily identify some challenges for anyone adapting the play to the screen. Casting the right characters to capture Lena, Walter, Ruth, and Beneatha will not be easy because they need to dramatize their individual frustrations but also the intense pride in their family and culture. The dynamic between family members needs to feel real and to hold viewers. Mama's and Walter's explosive scenes could be difficult to capture convincingly. It also would be challenging to expand the play to add scenes that take place beyond the house but film these scenes so that they still deepen the characters and are consistent with Hansberry's powerful lines. Most of all, it will be difficult to capture the right balance between the play's intense scenes but also its hopeful and playful moments, too.

5. Hansberry included Langston Hughes' poem "Harlem" in the preface to her play, but director Kenny Leon mentioned that although he fought to have it included in the Broadway theater production that he directed, they weren't able to work it in. He explains

in the Special Features to the film that they were able to open the film with Morgan Freeman doing a voice-over of the poem. The poem begins with a question, "What happens to a dream deferred?" This question is followed by more questions, suggesting that there are multiple reactions to dreams being unrealized. The dream may "dry up / Like a raisin in the sun"--perhaps withering and shriveling up, causing the dreamer to become deflated. But the raisin, like the grape before it, can still nourish and sustain. Other dreams can "fester like a sore--and then run," suggesting that they can become infected and spread through one's system and to others. Other "deferred dreams" may "stink like rotten meat," becoming toxic and attracting maggots and those who prey on defeated dreamers. Some dreams may "crust and sugar over--like a syrupy sweet," as if coated with a sugary coating that is simply covering up the disappointment or despair. Many times a "deferred dream" can become a burden that "just sags / Like a heavy load." The ending line is in italics and is haunting: "*Or does it explode?"* Students can be asked to list all possible ways that people might "explode" if their dreams are not realized. Most will think of negative explosions: angry outbursts, temper tantrums, fights and arguments, road rage, violence, crime sprees, verbal-spousal-child abuse, drug and alcohol or food binges, attacks, murders, riots, self-destructive or irrational behaviors, emotional break-downs, depression, suicide, crying, and screaming. But often students realize that "explode" can be positive as seen in the Harlem Renaissance: an epiphany, creative outburst, rebirth or new beginning, revival, inspiration, positive action, intervention, or rehabilitation. Most of all, students will realize that "deferred dreams" may be at the root of the "exploding" that we may associate with poverty, Harlem, and any inner city, like Chicago's South side.

Responses to Reflecting on the Film

1. As the movie opens with Morgan Freeman's voiceover of "Harlem," we see the city coming to life in the pre-dawn darkness: an African American trash collector emptying cans into a garbage truck, two men pushing a car, a milkman delivering milk bottles in a metal carrier. Inside the apartment building, a woman sticks her head out her door and calls, "Come on, Johnson, I'm out and there's still hot water." People are working or getting ready for work.

2. The movie has added scenes of Lena/Mama (played by Phylicia Rashad) leaving her apartment building before dawn, boarding a bus, and arriving at a beautifully landscaped home in an affluent area. We see that Lena needs to get up before dawn and ride on a bus for quite some time, so we can infer that she is hard-working, responsible, and open to other cultures. We also see Lena caring for a young white girl named Priscilla, who is very respectful and attached to Lena and expresses her sadness that this is Lena's last day working at Priscilla's home. Lena is very loving toward the child who waves to her from the school bus. We can infer that Lena is nurturing, open-minded, and supportive of other people's children, too. At the market when Lena asks the grocer if he has any better apples in the back and he tells her, "I don't think so," she persists and says, "But you can't be sure unless you check, right?" Lena then hears him tell a white customer that he will get her a basket of fresh apples "right away, Ma'am" and even pats her shoulder. When the grocer brings Lena some brownish apples with worm holes and bruises, Lena asks, "Am I being charged for the worms, too?" When he rudely responds, "You don't want them, Moms, you don't have to buy them." Lena puts the apples aside and says, "I don't

want them--and I'm *not* your mother." Then she looks him directly in the eyes and states, "There are other stores," and she goes elsewhere and gets much better apples. This scene shows Lena's strength of character, ability to stand up for what is right, and resilience in the face of racism.

3. Despite early signs of tension between Walter (played by Sean Combs) and Ruth (played by Audra McDonald), the film captures light moments, too. We watch Ruth waking up Walter when he doesn't turn off the alarm. She asks what's the point in having an alarm if he doesn't turn it off, and he jokes, "What do I need an alarm clock for when I've got you. The only problem is, I can't hit a button to turn you off." She responds by pulling his blanket off him with a smile. When she asks him what kind of eggs he wants and he answers, "Not scrambled," she immediately scrambles them. When he asks her, "What's your problem this morning?" she answers, "I don't have a problem. And I hope you don't volunteer to become one!" He playfully pulls her down on his lap as he tells her, "You're lookin' young--just like when I was courting you." But as she moves his hand away from her breast, he jokes, "It's gone now. You look like yourself again," and he laughs. When their sonTravis tells him that he'd better hurry into the shower because he heard Mr. Johnson coming down the steps," we see Walter and Mr. Johnson racing down the hall as Walter beats his neighbor into the shared bathroom. After his shower, he overhears Travis ask for 50 cents for school, and he gives it to his delighted son and then gives him an extra 50 cents for a treat. When Travis thanks him and leaves for school, Walter says proudly, "That's my boy!" Ruth shakes her head at him for giving Travis money that they can't afford, and Walter asks her, "What?" and then they both share a knowing laugh together. Soon afterwards, when he leaves for work, he immediately returns because he realizes he has no money left for carfare. Ruth smiles and asks, "50 cents?" However, we also hear Walter share his frustrations with Ruth, and she admits that they are no longer as close as they once were and that she didn't immediately tell him of her pregnancy. When Walter learns that Ruth is pregnant and considering an abortion, he doesn't even support her immediately or provide comfort because he is so overwhelmed by his own frustrations.

4. The film creates an aura of anticipation about the $10,000 check that is arriving as we hear Walter express his hope to "invest" it. But significantly Ruth and Walter's sister Beneatha (played by Sanaa Lathan) unite to remind him that it is "Mama's money." On the day that the check is arriving, Travis runs down to retrieve it from the mailman. The family watches her open it and helps her count the zeros after the 10 to make sure it is all there. Lena even implies that it is sad that $10,000 is "somebody's idea of what my Walter was worth." She is tempted to give it to the church, but she knows that Walter would have wanted her to use the money for their many needs. Later, when the money has been stolen by Willy Harris and the family is despairing and giving up on their dreams, Joseph Asagai, who is pursuing Beneatha, tells her, "There is something wrong when all the dreams in a house depend on a man dying."

5. Lena's dream is to have a home that her family can call their own and where Travis can finally have a bedroom. Lena has always been proud of her husband and family, of their surviving with dignity, and of nurturing her children's dreams. Now she finds that her children have dreams that she doesn't understand and values that she doesn't support.

Lena tells Ruth that her husband would have wanted his insurance money spent on helping his children's dreams come true.

Big Walter "believed in dreams, that man did, though none of his ever saw fit to come true. . . . He used to say, ' it seemed like God didn't see fit to give a black man nothing but dreams, but he did give us children to make those dreams seem worthwhile.'" Big Walter worked hard for his family and his children and longed for a better life for them, but he continued to live in poverty.

Walter Lee's dream is make successful business transactions so he can live as a rich man and afford luxuries for his family and the best schools for his children. He currently wants to go in with his friend Bobo and Bobo's contact Willy Harris to invest in a liquor store. Walter Lee is frustrated to be working as a chauffeur where he can see how the rich live but cannot make money because he has none to invest, but Mama definitely isn't in favor of Walter investing in a liquor store.

Beneatha's dream is to go to medical school and become a doctor, heal others, and contribute to the world in an important way. Beneatha longs to learn everything she can and to better understand and embrace her African culture. She is distraught when she learns that Walter not only lost his money in his investment scheme, but that he also used the $3000 that was to be saved for her medical schooling.

Her friend Asagai explains to Beneatha that years ago his dream was to learn to read, to study in America, and to make something of himself. He is the only one in his African village who can read and yet here he is in America, learning more than he ever thought possible: "I know extraordinary things can happen because they happen for me every day." He longs to help Beneatha realize her dream and then return to his village with her.

6. Beneatha's two suitors, George Murchison and Joseph Asagai, represent opposite values, goals, and attitudes toward women. George is a college student from a wealthy African American family, that, Beneatha feels, would not approve of George marrying her. George has an attitude of superiority that comes from being privileged and feeling entitled. He can afford to take Beneatha to the theater, but he ridicules her interest in African culture, in discussing philosophical ideas, and in her dream to be a doctor. He doesn't respect or encourage her dreams or goals. George seem anxious to "assimilate" to the dominant culture and to impress others with his wealth, travels, and college degree rather than really learning and growing from his experiences. Even Beneatha ultimately rejects him as "shallow," recognizing that his values are superficial and opposed to hers.

   In contrast, Joseph Asagai is from a small rural village in Africa, but he taught himself to read and is now dedicated to his studies in the United States. He values his African culture, hard work and dreams, and supports Beneatha's goal to become a doctor. In the film, Asagai explains to Mama that his African term for Beneatha is "one for whom bread or food is not enough." Then he turns to Beneatha and adds, "You are never satisfied. You are always hungry for more. That is you," and he is clearly proud of her quest to learn as much as she can. When Beneatha despairs that the money for medical school is gone, he encourages her to find another way to make her dreams a reality, and he is ready to help. Unlike George, he values individuality over "assimilation" into the dominant culture. In the film and the play, Asagai tells Beneatha how often he looks at her and thinks, "So this is what the new world has finally wrought," appreciating Beneatha's evolution and growth.

7. In the film, Beneatha tells Mama, "God is just one idea I don't accept. There simply is no God. There simply is man and it is he who makes miracles." Mama promptly slaps Beneatha across her face and tells Beneatha, "Now you say after me, 'In my mother's house, there is still God.'" Mama adds, "There's some ideas we just ain't gonna have in this house, not as long as I'm head of this family." Beneatha says a reluctant "Yes, ma'am," but it is clear that she is shocked by her mother's action. However, Ruth explains to Beneatha, "What you did was childish so you got treated like a child." Mama has raised her children to respect God and their elders, and Mama clearly sees Beneatha's rejection of God as a repudiation not only of Mama's beliefs but of the very foundation of Beneatha's upbringing.

8. Walter finds out about Ruth's pregnancy from his mother who realizes that Ruth is considering an abortion, illegal during that time, and knows that Walter Lee needs to be aware of this and to provide support for his wife. Walter initially claims that Ruth would never end a life, but Ruth reveals, "Yes, I would, too, Walter. I've made plans. Gave a woman the down payment." Mama pressures Walter more: "I'm waiting to hear your father in you speak and say, 'We are people who give life, not take it away.' . . . I'm waiting to see you stand up and be the man your daddy was." Throughout this scene, the camera follows Walter's eyes darting from his mother to his wife and back again, and we see him torn and troubled. However, when Walter says nothing and simply turns to leave, Mama says, "You're a disgrace to your father's memory." Beneatha's initial reaction to Ruth is thoughtless and selfish: "So, you pregnant? Where's it gonna sleep? On the roof?" But then Beneatha reconsiders and says, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it to come out like that." When Mama hears that Ruth did not go to her male doctor but to a female, she rightly suspects that Ruth saw a woman about an illegal abortion, and Ruth cries bitterly, clearly tormented by her plan to terminate this pregnancy. The film creates two new scenes that show Ruth initially going to a beauty salon to speak with the woman "Miss Tillie" who does the abortions there and the film shows her returning for the procedure. We watch Ruth taken into the back room as she is given a gown, and Miss Tillie sterilizes the instruments and then leaves the room. Ruth is clearly troubled but eventually makes her decision; she turns off the heat under the pot and leaves the room. In contrast to the play version, the director has created this scene to dramatize Ruth's decision.

9. When Walter Lee sees Mama return home, he asks, "Where were you, Mama? You didn't do something with that insurance money?" Instead of directly speaking to her son, Mama proudly addresses her grandson Travis when she tells him that she bought them a house. "You can thank God and your grandfather," and Ruth responds, "Praise God," and smiles. Ruth adds, "Walter, let me be glad. You be glad, too. Praise God." Mama then asks Walter to understand why: "I seen my family falling apart right in front of my eyes today. We was talking about killing babies and wishing each other was dead, and when we start talking like that, we gotta do something different, something big." Walter Lee is devastated: "You the head of the family. . . . So you butchered up a dream of mine--you, who are always talking about your children's dreams." Walter goes out and slams the door, and we see him at The Green Hat, drinking alone.

10. When Mama finds Walter, she fears that the next time she will find him "in a gutter or worse." While talking to him about his father's pain, she says, "He knew trials you don't begin to know, but he did it with dignity. I was married to that man, Walter. And as I

knew your father, I know you. You two are not that different." When Walter Lee reminds her that *she* once had a dream to leave the South and that she had to follow her dream, Mama decides that Walter needs to be able to make important decisions, too, and to attempt his dream. She explains that she has put down $3500 on the house, so that leaves $6500 left. She wants him to put $3000 into an account for Beneatha's schooling, so he will have $3000 for his own investments.

Walter is so moved that she trusts him with the money, but she says, "I ain't never stopped trusting you. Just like I ain't never stopped loving you. You need to go home to your wife who's worried sick about you." Because Walter has been entrusted with some of the insurance money to realize his dream, Walter's change in attitude is dramatic. Even though in the film, they step out into the pouring rain, Walter says, "All I see is sunshine and blue skies." In the next scene, Walter and Ruth are out dancing with Benny and George, having just seen a movie with them, too. He assures Ruth that his financial investment is "gonna be big, you just watch." Walter Lee is jubilant as he anticipates this new undertaking.

11. When the family visits their new home in Clybourne Park, they are thrilled with the spacious floor plan, airy rooms, and inviting yard. The film shows them running from room to room and then going out to the backyard, where they sit Mama while she opens a box of gardening tools from all of them. Then Travis gets his own gift for her, that he picked out himself. She opens up a gardening hat with plastic fruit on top. The others can't resist laughing, but Mama is very proud of Travis and his gift. As they turn to leave the yard, the camera pans to white neighbors looking at them disapprovingly from their windows, and Benny, fully aware that they are unwelcome, jokes, "Howdee-do, neighbors."

12. Mr. Karl Lindner tries to present himself, all smiles, as a representative of the Clybourne Park Improvement Association, a community group set up to look out for the neighbors' interests. Initially, they welcome him and Walter introduces all of them, except Mama, who isn't there. Mr. Lindner even claims that" people don't talk to each other enough" and the family seems to agree with that. But as Mr. Lindner claims that "racial prejudice has nothing to do with this" and that "our Negro friends are better off living in their own communities," the family members realize that he is there to keep them from moving to Clybourne Park. He not only offers to return their down payment but to give them additional money so they don't move in. When Mama comes home, she asks if he threatened them, and Beneatha says, "Oh no, Mama, they don't do it like that any more. He said we should all sit down and hate each other with good Christian fellowship." Benny's reference to " that" suggests the Ku Klux Klan of Mama's south.

13. When Bobo comes over to tell Walter Lee that Willy Harris has left town with all their money, Walter is shocked and can't believe it. We see him shove Bobo and then collapse on the steps in shock, repeating "Oh, God, please no." Bobo is tearing up because he has lost all his money, too. When Walter Lee goes inside, his family suspects what has happened, and his mother just wants to make sure that he didn't spend Beneatha's money, too. Walter confesses that he "never went to the bank at all. It's all gone. All of it," with his lip quivering. He gets on his knees, reaches toward him mother, and says, "I'm sorry," so contritely. We watch Mama crying and shaking so emotionally as she recounts how hard her husband worked each day, "killing himself, and then you give it away in one

day." Mama is shaking and weeping uncontrollably, and nearly hoarse, as she cries out, "Oh, God. Oh, God. Give me the strength." The camera pans to everyone crying, devastated.

14. When Walter Lee calls Mr. Lindner back to the house, he reveals that he is planning to request a huge amount of money to keep them from moving into the house. Mama is horrified by Walter's plan, and Beneatha exclaims, "Oh, God, where is the bottom so we can't go any farther?" Walter is convinced that his family is always worrying about the right and wrong thing to do and has never realized that it is really a choice between "those who take and those who get tooken." Walter explains, "He who takes the most is the smartest. And it don't make a damn bit of difference *how.”* Further, he is planning to ask Mr. Lindner for "more money than Willy took" as a bribe to keep them from moving in to the house. Mama is appalled and tells Walter Lee, "Son, I come from five generations of people who were slaves and share croppers, but ain't nobody in my family ever took pay from nobody that was a way of telling us that we weren't fit to walk the earth. We ain't never been that poor. We ain't never been that dead inside." Walter responds, "I didn't make this world." When Walter leaves and Beneatha says, "That is not a man. That is nothing but a toothless rat," Mama tells her that she was taught to love him: "Have you cried for that boy today--not for yourself but for him? The time to love the most is when he's at his lowest and can't believe in himself because the world done whipped him so. When you start to measure somebody, measure him right. Measure him right. Make sure you done take all the hills and valleys he come down through before he got to wherever he is." Mama's speech helps the audience realize Hansberry theme--that we need to postpone judgment and try to understand the effects of living with constant setbacks and frustrations.

15. When Mr. Lindner arrives with papers for the family to sign, Mama tells Travis, "Your daddy's getting ready to do something you're going to be needing to understand." Then she addresses Walter Lee, "Teach him about what's important in this world and teach him good, like Willy Harris taught you. Teach him about the takers and the tooken. Go on. Show your son what five generations done come to. " Walter looks back and forth between them and finally says, "Well, Mr. Lindner, me and my family are very plain people. My father was a laborer. My father almost beat a man to death because he called him a bad name or something. . . . We are a very proud people. My sister's going to be a doctor. . . ." Walter makes it clear that they have decided to move into their house "because my father earned it for us brick by brick. We don't want to start no trouble or fight no causes, and we will do everything to be good neighbors. We don't want your money." The family members are all smiling as Walter confirms that they have decided to move into the house. Mr. Lindner tries to appeal to Lena, but she makes it clear that Walter's decision holds. Lena and Ruth both are beaming and concur that Walter has "come into his manhood today" because he has made the right decision rather than the corrupt one. Walter Lee was tempted to sell out just for money, but he found the courage to take the right action and set an example for his son and his future child to follow. Walter did not stoop to their level and do anything shameful that his family would always find humiliating. Instead, he took a stand against racism, a stand that Hansberry's own father took when he moved his family into a white neighborhood despite protests and threats.

16. Mama's little plant represents all who struggle despite a lack of sunshine and optimal conditions for survival and growth: "Poor little plant. If that plant don't get more sunlight than it's been getting, it's just gonna give up." This line foreshadows how Mama's own family members will be tempted to give up: Ruth considers aborting her unborn child, and Walter Lee and Beneatha are overwhelmed when their money is stolen and they are all left in dark despair. But Mama's nurturing and care keep her family persisting, just as she keeps the plant alive. Mama never stops watering it and moving it back on the fire escape for some sun. Her family members laugh and ask her, "You gonna take that raggedy old plant to the new house?" but Mama definitely plans to give it a chance to thrive and grow deeper roots. Importantly, Walter Lee is the one to pick it up gently as they move so it doesn't get left behind. We feel that he has learned from his mother's values and is now ready to fight for life and nurturing for all. As the camera pans out the back door, up the stairs, and to the blue skies, the film suggests that they are all, like the plant, moving to a space with more sunlight, bluer skies, and upward mobility.