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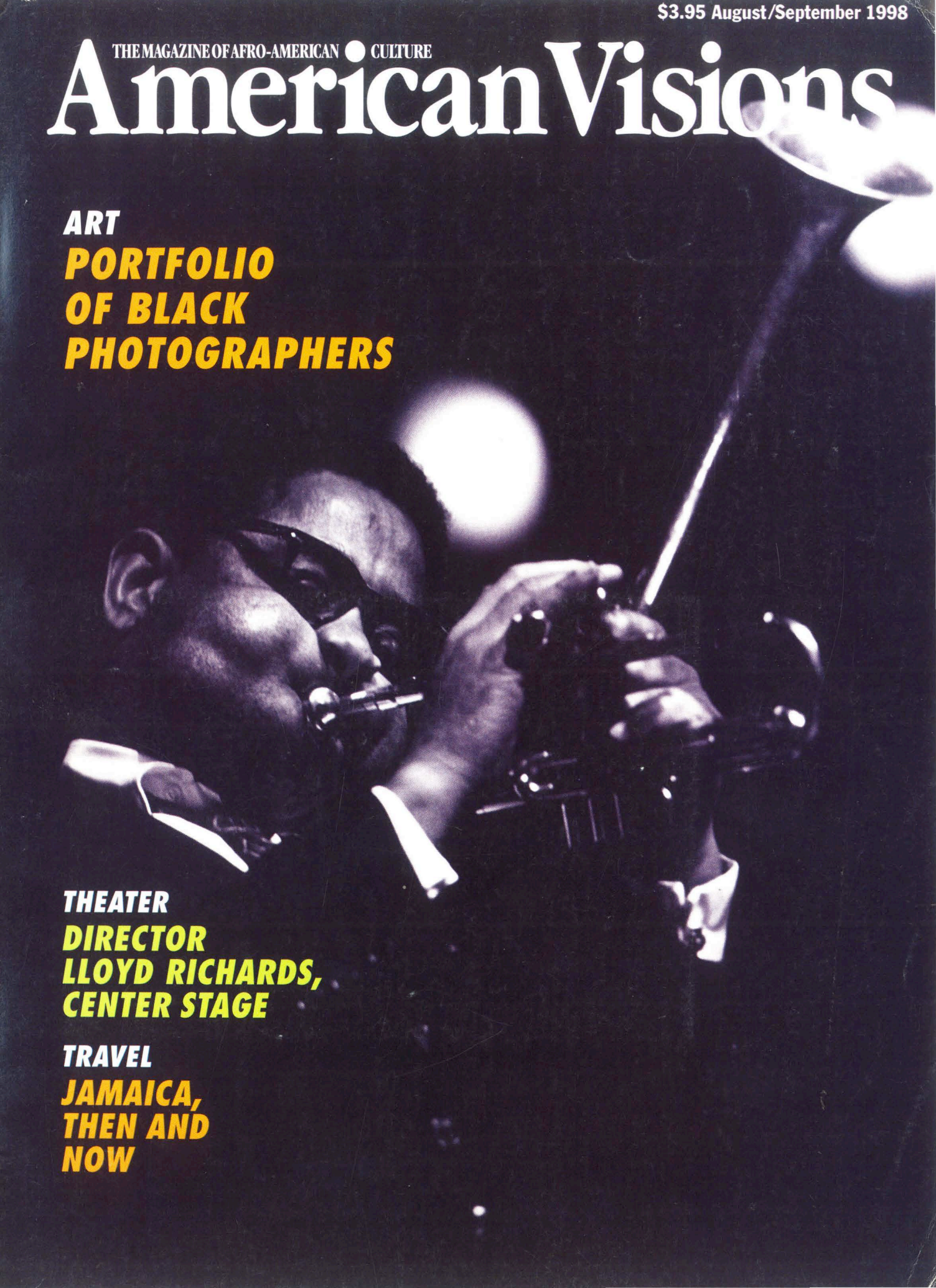
American Visions



ART

PORTFOLIO OF BLACK PHOTOGRAPHERS

THEATER

DIRECTOR LLOYD RICHARDS, CENTER STAGE

TRAVEL

JAMAICA, THEN AND NOW

LLOYD RICHAR

Photo by Friedman-Abeles/Courtesy Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

Scene One: A rehearsal of A Raisin in the Sun, *with (left to right) Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, Claudia McNeil, Diana Sands and director Lloyd Richards.*

The Griot Wears a Watch

by Sharon Fitzgerald

The National Playwrights Conference is in progress at the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Conn. And so, before our interview begins, director Lloyd Richards sets the timer on his watch so as not to be late for the Saturday matinee. There is no reason for alarm. While some storytellers splash about in an experience, wading through color and nuance, Richards—one of the most revered directors in the American theater—dives into the moment.

"I learned a lot of my theater discipline in radio," says Richards, who began his career in drama as an actor on the airwaves of Detroit. "You only had an hour rehearsal for a 15-minute show. With one director, if you were 15 seconds late, you never worked that show again. It really has affected how I run my life. Time is a very important factor. Don't waste it."

In 40 years of bringing to life the visions of playwrights, Richards has denied no one a part: authors, actors and audiences are all to be tested, inspired, revealed. "There is a great communication that exists in the theater," he says, "not only between the actors on stage, but between the audience and the actors and between the audience and the audience. I face the challenge of discovering what the playwright is trying to say, and my job is to help him say that. Whatever I can do to enhance that statement is what I involve myself in."

The "temperament" that buoys other artists does not serve Richards. In its place is a sensibility at once humble and erudite. His eyeglasses—as much as his trim, salt-and-pepper mustache and beard—add a no-nonsense quality to his avuncular attractiveness. Set against his tawny complexion, the aviator lenses seem a transparent shield, diverting others' attention from the fact that it is they who are being observed.

His stature defies designations of height or weight. The medium-size frame seems larger, somehow, bolstered by his bristling energy, precise discipline and formidable self-possession. As he strolls down the path leading from the O'Neill estate's Victorian mansion to the building where his office is located,

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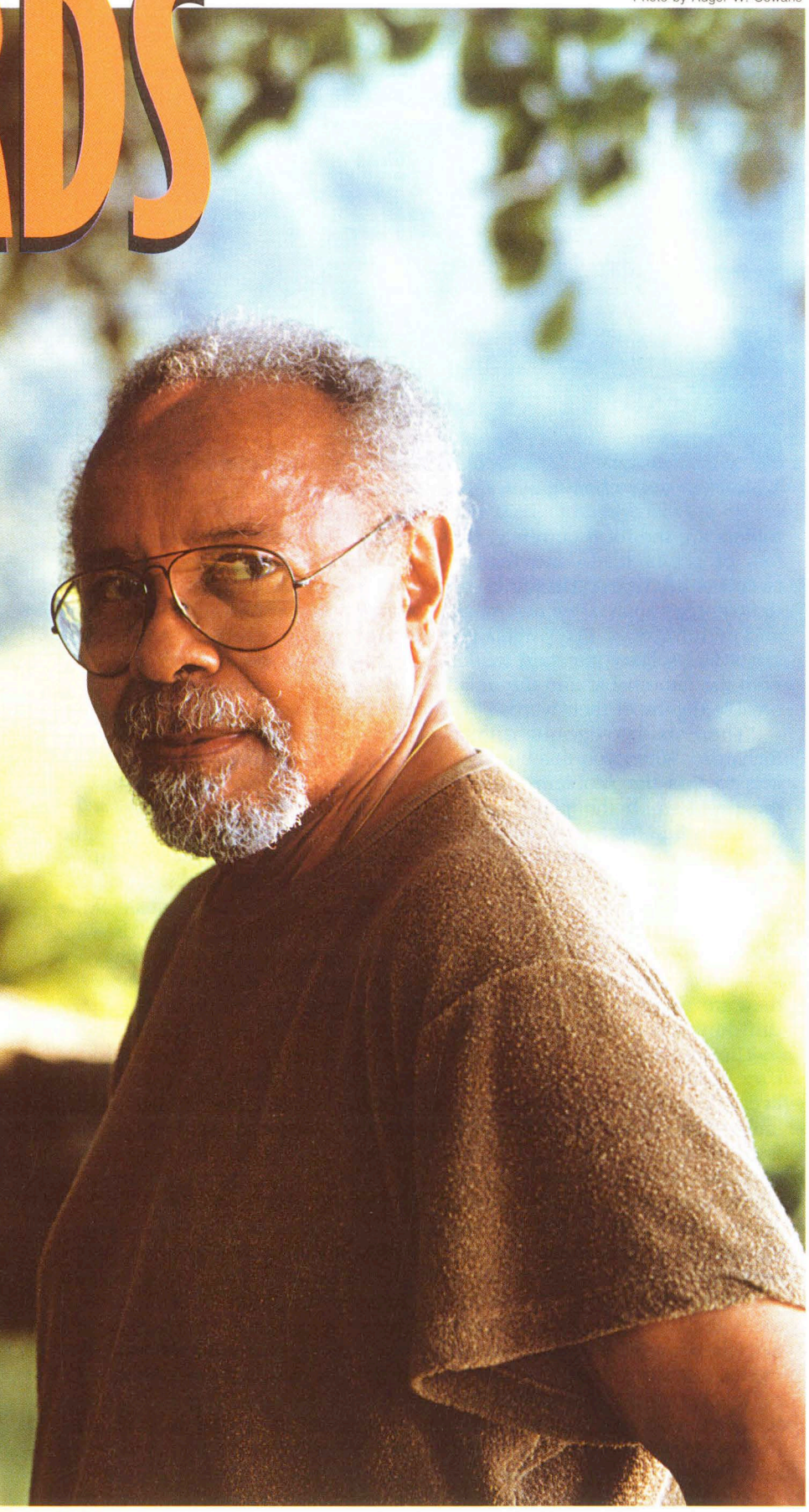
Photo by Adger W. Cowans



each thoughtful step conceals the urgent pacing of a prizefighter.

Richards was drawn to the theater by "meaningful words expressed in beautiful language." The youngest vestryman in his family's Episcopal church, he read aloud from the Bible on Sunday mornings. He discovered Shakespeare when asked to recite passages before his class in intermediate school. "I experienced being in front of a group of people, speaking my thoughts and my feelings through other people's words," he says. "I saw what effect that could have. As I went into the arts and into the theater, I have asked: 'What is the material that I am working with? What does it have to say?' And that has governed my decisions in life, my career-making decisions."

When he directed Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* on Broadway in 1959, Richards became one-third of a history-making triumvirate: the first black director of the Great White Way's first black drama, written by its first black playwright. As dean of Yale University's Drama School and artistic director of its Repertory Theater from 1979 to 1991, he ushered onto the American stage the works of South African playwright Athol Fugard, Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, and poet-turned-playwright August Wilson. As the artistic director of the National Playwrights Conference, he champions the discovery and nurturing of talented, unknown dramatists.

His imprint on the theater can be measured by the selfless determination with which he creates. "He is the one, the most important person outside of myself in my career," says actress Mary Alice, who won a Tony Award for her performance in *Fences* but who first studied with Richards after moving to New York and enrolling in his class at the Negro Ensemble Company. "He is the constant. There are other important people, like Joseph Papp,

Photo by A. Vincent Scarano

Scene Two: Lloyd Richards with playwright August Wilson.

Douglas Turner Ward, Ellen Stewart. But if I have to say who was the most important, he would be the one."

Actor, writer and director Bill Duke switched his major to drama after taking Richards' class at Boston University. "I can say to you quite honestly that without Lloyd Richards, I would not be in this business," Duke says. "Transcending the opportunities that he created for me and the training he gave me as a director and an actor, he gave me a sense of aesthetics which I utilize today in my work."

Upon the mention of Richards' name, newlyweds Angela Bassett and Courtney Vance both respond with proud affection. "He was at our wedding," Vance says. "We love him."

"He is a tremendous director and teacher," says Bassett. "He requires a great deal from you as an artist, but he also restores your faith and hope in what you are doing."

The nuts-and-bolts, summer-stock atmosphere at the O'Neill Theater Center, where the playwrights conference convenes, is an ideal place to observe the director. "This is where you see Lloyd at his best, see what he's made of," says actor Michael Rogers, who first performed at the O'Neill after graduating from Yale's Drama School in 1985. "He is patient with actors and playwrights. When they leave here, they're much smarter."

Under Richards' leadership and protective scrutiny, the conference has become a renowned oasis not just for writers, but for all theatrical troupers. Casually clad casts and crews traverse the woodsy New England estate with easygoing team spirit. No one seems distracted by the sloping fields of wildflowers, grass and trees, or by the Long Island Sound serenely flowing at the horizon. All focus instead on this haven's most idyllic aspect: the opportunity to hone their craft while contributing to the development of new dramatic works.

Fat scripts protected by green folders are the local currency. Clusters of actors read—and read between—the lines. Directors and dramaturges analyze scenes, staging and performances. Playwrights pace about like solitary generals, marking both the fathomable and the unfathomable depths of their words.

"There is no ego here," says Richards. "When you come up here, it is to find the problem, to reveal the problem to the playwright, to help him find an answer to it. If he can't, if he doesn't want to—if he thinks that what he's got is absolutely right and you don't think so—you do it his way. Nobody's at stake. The director's job, his talent, is not at stake. They are here because they are talented and because they can do this and not be threatened."

Theater buffs are welcomed at the conference's matinee and evening performances, yet are reminded by Richards in his hospitable prologues that what will be seen is a work in progress. Critics come to observe, not to review. Agents and artistic directors leave all wheeling and dealing on the opposite side of the fence. By securing such a setting, Richards insures that his dedication to quality can coexist with experimentation.

But despite (or perhaps because of) this egalitarianism, the conference has produced its share of legends. Participants speak in awe about August Wilson, who, according to O'Neill lore, submitted plays five times before his *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* was finally accepted for the workshop. Veteran actors recall observing Wilson for the first time—smoking cigarettes, simmering thoughts—as he ambled about the hillside.

"That was the first of many enjoyable summers I spent at the O'Neill, working on my plays," Wilson later wrote in the introduction to his collection, *Three Plays*. "The O'Neill conference has been the catalyst for major rewriting and rethinking."

The conference's no-dealmaking clause applies also to Richards, who is careful not to reveal an affinity for any playwright. As artistic director, he oversees and comments on all projects and interacts with every artist, but leaves the hands-on task of directing to others. Still, during the summer of *Ma Rainey*, the temptation was great. Richards knew that when he returned to New Haven that fall, he wanted to produce and direct the play at Yale Rep.

"I could not tell August that I wanted to do his play at Yale until the conference was over," Richards says, "and by that time, there were other people interested in the play, so I had to get in line. It took from September—after the conference, when I first told him of my interest—until February of the next year, when he finally called me and said that he had ruled out all the other possibilities and asked if I was still

interested. I was. When the play was selected for Yale, then our working relationship began."

Their pairing has been described as one of the most important in the history of American theater. In the 15 years since *Ma Rainey* made its first appearance at the O'Neill—cutting its bluesy path to Yale and then to Broadway—the two artists have brought five additional works onto the New York stage.

Fences, Joe Turner's Come and Gone, The Piano Lesson, Two Trains Running and *Seven Guitars* all picked up where *Ma Rainey* left off—as lyrical, homegrown explorations of the African-American experience. Racism, dreams, secrets, fear, courage, ghosts and humor all found a place in Wilson's universe of ordinary people. Richards guided the tensions and characterizations expertly—layering in some places, juxtaposing in others—at all times allowing circumstances to arise.

His directorial touch was light, preserving the spontaneity of Wilson's dramatic arch while exacting its influence. The works' rhythmic folklore riveted audiences. Theater professionals bestowed awards. There have been Pulitzer Prizes and several New York Drama Critics Circle Awards. In addition to the Antoinette Perry (Tony) Awards received by Richards (as the year's best director) and Mary Alice, *Fences* garnished two others: Best Play and Best Actor (James Earl Jones).

Broadway's resistance to works not catapulted by song and dance makes this success even more remarkable. According to Wilson, the support of Richards graced his artistic genesis: "From the O'Neill to Yale to Broadway, each step, in each guise, his hand has been firmly on the tiller as we charted the waters from draft to draft and brought the plays safely to shore without compromise. We were guided by the text, our own visions, and occasionally by the seat of our pants, to a port that was worthy of the cause."

As Richards tells his childhood stories, it becomes evident why Hansberry and Wilson captured his ear: he shares both writers' strong, resilient tones. Also, his early years brought challenges similar to some that these authors have dramatized.

Born in Toronto, Richards moved with his family to Detroit after his father, a master carpenter and Garveyite from Jamaica, learned that Henry Ford was offering workers in his automobile plant $8 a day. The family's hopes for a better life were tragically altered when Richards' father died suddenly, leaving his wife to raise their five children.

The pairing of Lloyd Richards and August Wilson has been described as one of the most important in the history of American theater.

Lloyd, the second born, was then 9 years old. He and his older brother found odd jobs to help keep the family together. While his mother took in laundry and worked in kitchens, Lloyd shined shoes, delivered newspapers, sold magazines. The circumstances worsened when his mother lost her eyesight to a badly treated case of glaucoma.

His practical, Depression-era upbringing instructed Richards that a career should bring economic security. He began college as a prelaw student at Wayne State University. But he had not forgotten those recitations of the Bible and Shakespeare. Wayne State was one of the nation's few academic institutions offering professional training in theater. The faculty of its radio department (strengthened by Detroit's importance as a commercial market) contained writers, directors and actors from such programs as *The Lone Ranger* and *The Green Hornet*. Richards was hooked.

He narrated a Sunday morning radio broadcast sponsored by the Councils of Churches and worked nights as a disc jockey. In time, he would perform on other radio programs, including the whimsical *Mr. Jolly's Hotel for Pets*, on which he had the recurring role of Sam, Mr. Jolly's chief assistant. Still, breaking into national radio broadcasts was difficult because some sponsors feared that hiring a black actor would cause a backlash in their Southern markets. Landing parts in the theater proved even more difficult.

Richards compensated for the on-stage exclusion by working as much as he could behind the scenes. He had determined that drama would be his lifework. "I was going to law school because that is what you did in those days," he says. "Become a doctor, a lawyer, a teacher or a social worker. That was the way to security.

"The question for me became, What is security? Is security money in the bank? A piece of land? A house? Or is security getting up in the morning and not counting the hours? When I went into theater, I didn't go into it because it was a job. I went into theater because I was choosing a way of life."

During World War II, Richards enlisted in the Army Air Corps and entered Tuskegee, Alabama's flight training program for Negro soldiers. After the war, he completed his studies at Wayne and took a job as a caseworker for the welfare department in Detroit. He also allied himself with 19 other actors to form a repertory company, which they first called These Twenty People and then rechristened the Actors Company.

Nearly every night after leaving the welfare office, Richards retreated to the company's homemade theater, rehearsed, and performed an evening show. After-

ward, he headed to the radio station for his nightly spin as a disc jockey and then returned to the theater to rehearse or help build sets. When he made it home, the troupe was often in tow. "We would go to my house and raid my mother's refrigerator," he says. "I think that was her first sense that the theater might be all right. She got to know the people in her kitchen, and that was a whole different thing."

His family's acceptance made it easier to answer the inevitable call. When a friend in New York offered to help him obtain an audition, Richards quit his various jobs, packed a trunk, and headed east. "There were people who said, 'You'll be back in two weeks,'" he recalls. "But I never went back, except to visit, of course. That was that."

New York, the mecca of theater, was at its peak. Dozens of workshops offered technique to hundreds of hopefuls. New arrivals found classes—in voice, movement, speech—usually unavailable back home. Uptown, the Rose McClendon Players fomented theater in Harlem. Downtown, teachers such as Stella Adler harnessed a generation of marquee students. Even off- and off-off-Broadway exposure could establish one as an artist, if not a star.

It was showtime, and like so many young actors, Richards was willing to pay the price. He roomed at the Harlem YMCA, worked as a waiter in the executive dining room of Paramount Pictures, took classes, "made the rounds" of nonstop auditions, steadied himself against the tide of rejections. Performances in such off-Broadway productions as *The Egghead* earned him promising reviews, but he was disappointed by the limited number of character roles offered young black actors. Invited by the respected acting instructor Paul Mann to teach at his studio, Richards accepted. It was there that his skills as a director caught the attention of another struggling actor, Sidney Poitier.

Although Poitier was on the brink of stardom, at that moment he was still making the rounds, looking for opportunities to perform. His classwork with Richards evolved into a friendship, and the two often discussed their craft and their dreams. One night over a couple of hot dogs and a beer ("I'm sure we shared the beer," Richards has said, "we couldn't afford two"), Poitier vowed that when his break arrived, he wanted Richards to be the director.

To Richards, it was a promise made in the trenches, not the type to be considered either broken or intact. But several years later, when Broadway producer Philip Rose asked Poitier-the-movie-star to accept the lead in a work written by an unknown playwright, the actor urged Rose to entrust Richards with the words of Lorraine Hansberry. The necessary meetings were held; expectations meshed. The groundwork was laid for *A Raisin in the Sun*.

Hearing Richards describe the tumultuous period that preceded the play's Broadway debut, one is reminded not to romanticize or take achievements for granted. "There were days when we thought it would never happen," he says. "To get *Raisin* on at all, Phil Rose is certainly to be applauded. He was almost forced to give it up. He couldn't raise the money, couldn't get a theater.

"The 'smart money' on Broadway did not invest in that show. There was no 'smart money' in it. *Raisin* had more investors than any other show that had previously been done on Broadway. It was all small, little amounts of money. There was one big investor, Harry Belafonte. I think he invested two thousand dollars. He was doing well at the time, and he was, of course, a friend of Sidney's. But the rest was fifty dollars, a hundred dollars, two hundred dollars. That came together to make the show happen."

On March 11, 1959—after a daunting year and a half of financial woes and out-of-town performances—*A Raisin in the Sun* finally opened at Broadway's Ethel Barrymore Theater. It was clear to the drama world that this was not to be "a dream deferred." Seven New York dailies sent critics, who pounded out their reviews in time for the next day's editions. *Variety*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Village Voice* declared the play a turning point, a revelation. The New York Drama Critics chose it—over Eugene O'Neill's *A Touch of the Poet* and Tennessee Williams' *Sweet Bird of Youth*—as the best play of the year.

Summer Highlights

In Houston, through August 3, Lloyd Richards, August Wilson, Ntozake Shange, Woodie King and others gather under the auspices of Houston's Ensemble Theatre for the 12th annual Black Theatre Network. For more details, call the Ensemble Theatre, at (713) 520-0055. Meanwhile, in New York City, an exhibition at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, "Blacks on Stage: Selections From the Helen Armstead-Johnson Collection," displays more than 400 items—including rare books, posters, photographs and costumes—that collectively explore the African-American presence in music, dance and drama during the 19th and 20th centuries. The exhibition, which runs through September 13, draws heavily upon the research of African-American theater historian Helen Armstead-Johnson, whose interest in this field dates back to a chance 1966 meeting with the late musical theater composer Noble Sissle (*Shuffle Along* [1921], *Chocolate Dandies* [1924], etc.).

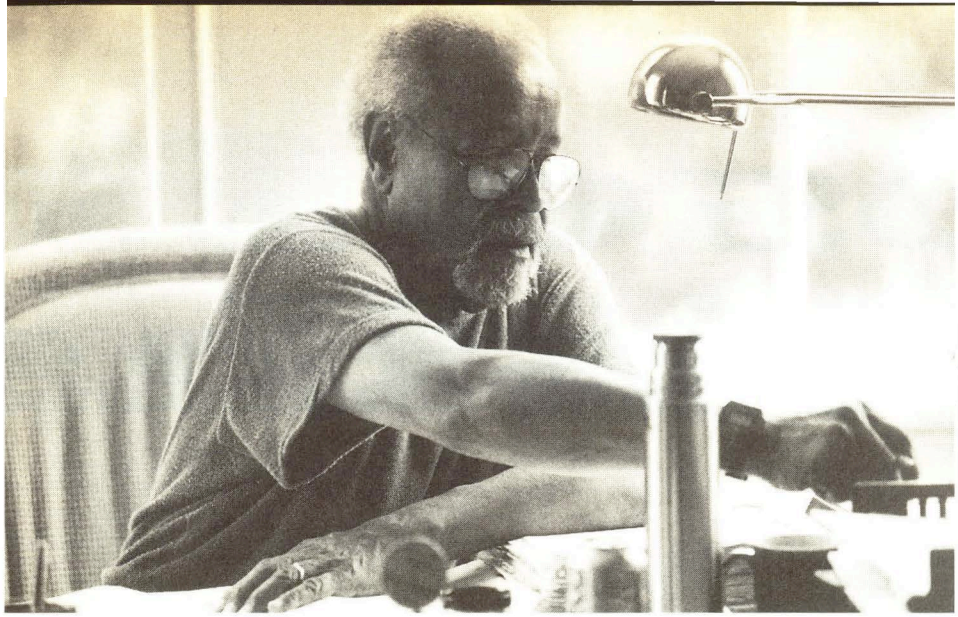


Photo by Adger W. Cowans

Hansberry's portrait of a family on the South Side of Chicago challenged the American theater's ignorance and stereotypes and transported audiences into the heart of the black experience. Some critics were comforted by their notion of "a Negro play" that presented domestic concerns over the perceived militancy of the civil rights movement, but others understood that *Raisin* had broken down barriers and shed light on America's social inequalities.

None supposed that the theater would ever be the same. Richards' direction was described as "flawless" and "discerning" and "brilliantly staged." He received the first of his five Tony nominations that year. Tenderly he recalls one of the theater's cleaning women telling him that she was saving money for a ticket because she'd heard that "the play has something to say about us."

Richards is neither puzzled nor rancorous when considering the role that racial injustice has played in his career. Instead, he remains determined to create, and to do so in spite of the barricades. "If you think there is something that needs to be done, do it; don't talk about it," he says. "I've gone through endless talk about all the same issues, and they repeat themselves cyclically. At some point you say: 'I'm not going around that circle again. I've been there.'"

While he was the dean of Yale's Drama School and artistic director of its Repertory Company, he attempted to break the pattern. By providing drama students with both comprehensive training and a repertory stage on which to display their talents, he hoped that Yale would become a model for other academic programs. And by offering a repertory stage to theater professionals such as Mary Alice, Glenn Close, Jason Robards, Colleen Dewhurst and James Earl Jones, he encouraged risk-taking within an art form increasingly controlled by the bottom line.

"I was engaged very much in training. I was engaged in new play production. I was engaged in the professional theater," Richards says. "And those were all components that Yale had as parts of its program. So when they were looking at people for the position, I guess I was one of the few people in the country with the qualifications in all areas.

"It was very important for me, because Yale was a bellwether program. There were very few really professional training institutions in the country, about a dozen. They were struggling to develop and maintain standards, to exist. And if Yale went down the drain—having the greatest visibility and with a professional theater attached—it would affect the whole pyramid."

"Creating an artistic home" at Yale for such playwrights as Wilson and Fugard not only improved the chances that works such as *Fences* and *A Lesson From Aloes* would make it to Broadway; it also enriched the school's artistic environment. "It manifested the fact that a training institution and a professional theater could productively exist together," Richards says of Yale.

Seated at the picnic table beneath the O'Neill estate's treasured oak, the place where the playwrights gather, Richards has just a little more time on his hands. The year's conference had ended a few days before. The twinkle in his blue-gray eyes shines clearly through his glasses. Those same lenses that at first seemed like a barrier have suddenly become a canvas. The reflection of the world encompassing him—the sky, the clouds, the tree-lined hillsides—appears vast upon this surface.

"I have never considered myself an idealist," Richards says. "That would be an appellation that someone else would have to put on me. But I am concerned about human beings, about the human condition—about the bettering of it, and the revelation of it, and the challenge of it.

"What the future will understand about your time and your culture and what you've contributed to it will be influenced by art. That is much more valuable than warships. The rest of the world may be affected by a bomb we drop on them, but their perception of our society will come through the arts."

Being in the vanguard, he has shouldered responsibilities and he has launched countless dreams. "To do an original play is, for me, the ultimate formation of the piece," he says. "That's it. You've proved the play, its value.

"When I was in high school, I used to take swimming instead of gym. Every day, you'd race there to be the first one to jump into the settled water, to dive in and swim the length of the pool. You are making the first waves, and those waves reverberate. Other people come afterward and do whatever they do in the pool, but you have set the pattern.

"That is a sense of what it is like to do a play for the first time."

Sharon Fitzgerald is a freelance writer in New York City. Her last article for American Visions, *"Robert Colescott Rocks the Boat," appeared in the June/July 1997 issue.*