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## Review: Hansberry Baldwin Ensemble celebrates those who are 'young, gifted and Black'

by Shamontiel L. Vaughn



On Sunday afternoon, 20 Hansberry Baldwin Ensemble actors from nine years old to adults, celebrated playwright Lorraine Hansberry's legacy with the performance entitled "*To Be Young, Gifted and Black*."

Taking on various writings by Hansberry, the "*To Be Young, Gifted and Black*" took place at Harris Hall Theatre on 1818 East 71st Street from May 22 to May 24.



The two-hour play discussed topics including the civil war, race riots, the hardship of Black men growing up in segregation, sexism in the community, contraception before the birth control pill, what it was like to be a child during Hansberry's days, gentrification, the Freedom Fighters and how Black vernacular has been an influence on language today as much as that of Shakespeare and other Old English literature. But most importantly, the play encouraged those who are "young, gifted and Black" that "This world needs your gifts." The performance ended with Nina Simone's song "*To Be Young, Gifted and Black*." In addition to speaking, the play took on a few music performances, including African dance choreography.

The Hansberry Baldwin Ensemble is the residential company of Ray of Hope Center of the Arts. Ray of Hope Center of the Arts was founded by Victoria C. Brady on September 9, 2002, to provide "high quality arts programming to youth, adults and senior citizens with an emphasis on those that are disadvantaged." Brady is also the Executive Director of Ray of Hope and the director of the play. The diverse cast of 30 (some were not in Sunday's performance) includes African-Americans, Trinidadians and whites.

On Tuesday, May 19, the birthday of Lorraine Hansberry, there was a naming ceremony, with the families of James Baldwin and Lorraine Hansberry accepting the name of the group. Once the name was official, the group was introduced.

"I've been watching this group for the last few months," said Dr. Vivian R. Jones, Brady's mother and the founder; president and CEO of ABJ Community Services, Inc., sitting in the audience. "During the opening performance, you guys brought tears to my eyes."

Several other audience members showed their appreciation for the Hansberry Baldwin Ensemble as well while others reminisced.

"Some of the things that happened (during the play) had transpired in my life," another audience member said. She went on to say she hoped that her granddaughter would learn from this play.



The auditions for the play were held in January. Some cast members are related, including twins Jillian and Joshlyn Lomax; one is Brady's daughter, Lauren Brady; and there are a plethora of experienced actors and singers, including Will Davis, Desiree Dawson, Shanara Fornett, Marilyn Grimes, Bernell Lassai, Deborah Ross, Marshelle Renee Sanders, Daniel Sichelski, Karen Dreasler, and those with modeling experience, such as Brittany Shepherd and Olivia Johnson.

Several others have been cast in Ray of Hope's previous production, "*That's Love, the Passion of Jesus Christ*," including Ambrea Conway, A.J. Curry, Angelica Dawson, Giorgio Johnson, Matthew Thomas, Kevin Guise, Final Phaze Dance Troupe's Tevin Donald and Malachai Perkins, and one of BET's 2009 Sunday Best's finalists, Pamela Lucas.

Although a fairly new cast, they all equally pulled their weight, and I was surprised to find out some weren't veteran actors. Brady stated that this was their second production, and they practiced for four months before showing it the public.

Two skits stood out to me the most though. One was a scene between Shepard and Giorgio Johnson, a couple who discussed the danger of Johnson running away to freedom like his brother. I thought their chemistry was great, and had my eyes and ears glued to them.



The other memorable scene was Sanders role as the opinionated, feminist, tough-as-nails character who was determined to get Thomas' character as an Ethiopian to care about the race war going on. First serious then comical, these two also collaborated well.

Although the performance for "*To Be Young, Gifted and Black*" has ended, the Hansberry Baldwin Ensemble is jumping full speed ahead with more plays in the fall. The focus for their third production will be on their other namesake, author James Baldwin.

Ray of Hope also has an after-school program called Teen REACH, funded by the Illinois Department of Human Services and After School Matters, for teenagers ages 12-17. The free outreach program, which currently has 45 teens, provides music production, dance, acting, singing, life skills education and homework assistance.

For more information, visit [rayofhopearts.org](http://rayofhopearts.org).

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