A play of ideas, The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window angered and confused critics for two basic reasons. First, it was not about the black experience. In fact, it had only one black character in it. Lorraine Hansberry, hailed by the establishment as a new black voice, had written in this play about white artists and intellectuals who lived in Greenwich village. Second, the play dared to challenge the apathy of the American intellectual and his indifference to the serious problems overtaking the world. It is a call to arms to white liberals and intellectuals. Set in 1964, certainly a time of racial turmoil, the play basically reflects harmony and acceptance between blacks and whites, Jews and Christians, and peoples of varied backgrounds.

Lorraine Hansberry's greatest achievement in this play lies in her ability to avoid the obligations imposed by race on the average talented Negro. The obligation to limit one's scope to the immediate
but parochial injustices of racial intolerance has for long sapped the creative energy of the Negro writer. Having paid her debt to this tradition with *A Raisin in the Sun*, however, Hansberry achieves a significant break-through with *The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window* which is clearly in the mainstream of contemporary drama. The Negro is no longer seen as the victim of a savage social situation. He becomes a part of the society deperately searching for a valid response to the human condition.

The play is remarkable for not engaging in any direct fashion with the question of race and "difference", when such questions were uppermost in the minds of blacks. The play does have one black character in Alton Scales, but his presence seems only to foreground the absence, as it were, of blackness as a motif in the play. The play's unusualness is partly due to the dominance of white characters like Sidney Brustein, Sidney's wife, Iris, Iris's sisters, Mavis and Gloria, the playwright, David Ragin, and the politician, Wally. In addition, the chief character, Sidney is a Jew. Hansberry's sympathetic treatment of a Jew, the
traditional enemy of the Black, is again a radical departure for a Black playwright.

The play comments on the idea of the intellectual, the problem of race and difference, though not explicitly, the falseness of the intellectual position of the Absurdists, all motifs present in Lorraine Hansberry's other writings. It implicitly questions the methods of LeRoi Jones and Ed Bullins whose forceful and aggressive negation of White America is partly answered. Hansberry does this by making her characters mostly white Americans. Finally, the play relates itself to the American tradition at large by locating itself within the tradition of Absurd drama and by relating itself to plays like Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. In this play Hansberry is caught between her concept of drama as a means of a social statement and drama as an examination of character.

In this play the plot is secondary to character, and serves only as a vehicle for Sidney Brustein's personal odyssey towards self-discovery. Through a series of confrontations with family and
friends, Sidney is given an intimate look at human frailties which lie behind the mask of each character. The most startling revelations centre on his wife and sisters-in-law: Iris, his beautiful, long-haired protegee desiring rather the tinsel world of stardom; Gloria, the sensitive call-girl who commits suicide because she cannot bear her burden of guilt and loneliness, and Mavis, the bourgeois Philistine, whose image belies the painful compromise and courage of her personal life. Sidney, the symbol of modern man, stares human ugliness full in the face and seems powerless against it, typically in the tradition of a character from an Absurd play.

The play opens with a portrait as it were of Sidney and his appearance. He wears a white shirt open at the sleeves and mismatched jacket and trousers. He does not care for his appearance, and Hansberry is careful to say that this is "not an affectation". Sidney has eyes which are "wider and more childish than the sort generally associated with the romance of the intellectual" (6). By contrast, the romance of being an intellectual has not escaped Alton Scales who, unlike Sidney, "is
dressed in the mustard, corduroy and sweatered manner of his milieu" (6). The milieu is Greenwich village in New York city, "the preferred habitat of many who fancy revolt, or at least, detachment, from the social order that surrounds us" (3). The milieu of the play is not just the village, but the whole intellectual world with which Lorraine Hansberry has such an engaging relationship.

More an intellectual than a businessman, Sidney has just closed the Silver Dagger, his failed night club, and has purchased a newspaper. He is an intellectual who no longer cares. At one time he was politically active and involved - an idealist. It is never made explicit, but it is clear that he went through the McCarthy period, was anguished about the persecution and eventual execution of the Rosenbergs, then succumbed to the ennui of the Eisenhower years. Yet he has been trying to make a new life for himself, to give his life a meaning as significant as that which it once had. Instead, he has merely drifted from one failing endeavour to another. He has adopted a mask of cynicism. His wife, a young aspiring actress who works as a waitress, is the constant target for Sidney's bitterness
and self-hatred. The play delineates the reconstruction of Sidney through his involvement in a political campaign. Alton returns with Wally O' Hara, an earnest political candidate in his early forties. When Alton carrying a "VOTE O' HARA FOR REFORM" poster arrives and wants Sidney's newspaper to endorse Wally, the uncommitted, uninvolved Sidney refuses, saying, "I no longer even believe that spring must necessarily come at all" (22).

From Lorraine Hansberry's play, it becomes apparent that commitment does not mean for her exactly what it had for Brecht or even Rice and Odets. Nor does it mean an intransigent alignment with sectional interests which undermines the drama of LeRoi Jones. The commitment of which she speaks is one to life rather than death, hope rather than despair and to human potential rather than human failure. Her enemy is thus not the racial bigot but rather the indifferent and the self-deceived. In terms of art her enemy is Camus and the theatre of the absurd, so that The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window is as much a statement of artistic responsibilities as of social inadequacies. Hansberry's
rejection of the absurd is based on a desire to re-constitute the humanist heresy of belief in man.

The Sidney Brustein of the title is a liberal who fluctuates between the two poles of liberalism: Thoreausque dissociation and enthusiastic political involvement. The play effectively spells out the inadequacies and ultimately the futility of both these extremes. In essence, Sidney Brustein is but another of the American heroes in search of primal innocence waging a holy war and deeply wounding those around him.

In its central dramatic action, Sidney Brustein bears a strong resemblance to *A Raisin in the Sun*. Like Walter Lee Younger, Sidney passes through confusion to triumph to apparent defeat to a new commitment. Sidney is no Walter Lee, no Negro working man fighting a losing battle with the American dream in a Chicago slum. Sidney, as Miss Hansberry says in the *Times* article, is "a nervous, ulcerated, banjo-making young man in whom I see an embodiment of a certain kind of Greenwich village intellectual." The most determined voice in a highly articulate
circle, Sidney is an essentially sensitive man. He is drawn to the power of his intellectual insights and the neatness of his verbal summaries that he employs against his friends and family. He does not quite recognize that the name of the game is aggression. Sidney's relationship with his wife, Iris, is strained because he refuses to recognise the reality of the world but chooses rather to remould it, and her, to suit his own personal vision. On the one hand he tends to lapse into a romantic dream of man as innocent and free spirit removed from the conventional corruption of the city. In this mood, he sees Iris as a mountain nymph. On the other hand he throws himself with naive faith into political activism. The crisis between Sidney and his wife is a crisis caused by Sidney's liberalism. For Iris rebels against the sterility of a life which gravitates around idealistic dreams and facile crusades.

At the beginning of the play Sidney, who has just admitted to the failure of one of his impractical schemes, is prevailed upon to use a newspaper which he has bought to support a reform
candidate in a local election. He accepts the campaign as a further diversion and the sign which he puts in his window is less evidence of his faith in the possibility of change than of a self-justifying sense of the righteousness of protest. The act of protest is sufficient and when his candidate is elected he is genuinely amazed for, Hansberry suggests, Sidney's liberalism is the exercise of conscience without the attendant responsibility:

"I didn't believe that what happened today could happen in a million years. That we would win. That little old ladies and big tough truck drivers and little skinny Madison Avenue ad men would all get up today and go out and wipe out the Big Boss in one fell stroke! Can you believe it? ... We don't know anything about the human race that's what. Not a damn thing when you come down to it." (98)

When Sidney rages, in the second act, against a world in which anger and passion have been transmuted into neurosis and unconcern, he is voicing the bewilderment of his age: 'Yes, by all means hand me the chloroform of my passions; the sweetening of
my conscience; the balm of my glands. Oh blessed age! That has provided that I need never live again in the full temper of my rage..." (96) Sidney is too wrapped up in his own disillusionment to offer any help or consolation to Gloria. Having been forced to confront the true nature of his liberalism, he lapses into despair and trades absurdist aphorisms with David, while his sister-in-law's own despair deepens into suicide.

The Sign which hangs in Sidney Brustein's window is not an ironical comment on the impossibility of achieving anything in what Iris sees as this "dirty world."

There are things talked about... laughed about while you stand there framed by that sign... that make me wonder how I ever thought you knew anything about this world at all...

This world, Sidney! It's so dirty.(116)

It represents the public face of a man whose vision of the world is radically simplified; Until he is brought to the point of confrontation, he fails to understand what Hansberry conceives as the nature of
commitment. The sign becomes, as Iris puts it to Sidney "It's like spit in your face" (117) — a significant phrase carrying overtones of Miller's All My Sons.

Sidney Brustein is as much the Parodus sisters' play as Sidney's. In this we may say that the play lacks a central character. The Parodus Sisters enjoy a close relationship. They are also close to each other in age. Hansberry carefully delineates each character in terms of names and physical appearance. Iris's name suggests a flower of delicacy, beauty, and femininity. Mavis's name suggests lack of imagination. Mavis was the name of a popular, sweet chocolate soft drink of the time as well as the brand name of a cheap, scented talcum powder. Both of them are emblems of depressing conventionality. Gloria's name has vague religious overtones which may suggest her essential innocence.

Since hair is an ageless symbol of fertility, Iris with her long, flowing, dark hair may be considered the most sexual. Gloria, with medium-length blonde hair, appears sexual, but hers is a
cold, often twisted sexuality. Mavis's short, sculptured red hair denies sexuality, although she is the only sister with children. Iris's blue-jeaned style suggests a free spirit, Mavis's simple elegant clothes reflect the control she imposes on her life, and Gloria's girl-next-door clothes reflect the person she would like to be.

Each of these women seems to feel that her life was predestined by her father. Considering her father crude and stupid, Iris thinks that she is not very bright, which leads to a feeling of real insecurity. The only sister who admired her father was Mavis who sees the spontaneity of a "backwoods poet" as an impossible goal. Gloria is perhaps affected most deeply. Her father called her a tramp. She became a prostitute. Even though she quits prostitution, she feels branded for life. David tells her, "Trying to live with your father's values can kill you ..." Gloria replies, "No, Sweetie, living without your father's values can kill you" (132).
Not only does Mr. Parodus affect his daughter's views of themselves, but he also influences their choice of the men they love and marry. But since each woman's vision of herself is skewed, her vision of her husband or lover is also warped. In Sidney, Iris indeed found a thinker, but one who lacks the empathy and compassion to understand her desire to become an actress. She wants everyone "to know that when I die more than ten or a hundred people will know the difference. I want to make it, Sid" (76). Until the end of the play, Sidney sees Iris as an unspoiled mountain girl, an adolescent beauty.

At first, seeing Fred as having a touch of the poet, Mavis was happy. Before they were married, Fred drove forty miles to see her and then drove forty miles back home in a decrepit car. But after their marriage, Fred became "steady and ordinary." Their sexual appeal for each other faded, and Fred took a mistress. Despite this lapse, Mavis is grateful that he married her. "There was no rush years ago at home to marry Mavis Parodus" (109). Mavis is trapped. "I take care of my boys. I shop
and I worry about my sisters. It's a life" (111). Beneath her polished exterior, she lacks a sense of self-worth.

Thinking that she wants "rich men," Gloria takes the short cut to success by becoming a prostitute. Her guilt causes her to try suicide four times. It is in her last attempt that she succeeds. Perhaps she could have averted Alton's rejection of her, had she told him the truth before he learned it from someone else. She had given up her business. She planned to lead a new life. But she felt she could not escape her past. She was doomed by her father. Gloria's suicide is as much a form of non-commitment to herself as is Sidney's initial refusal to become involved in his community in politics.

What partially rescues these three women from a spiritual wasteland is that they all care deeply about each other. Indeed, the three Parodus Sisters function as a modern-day Greek chorus in the play, commenting upon and watching life around them. As the modern Furies of ambivalence, nihilism, retreat, and denial descend upon Sidney, these
women serve individually and collectively to remind him that fate offers him a choice. They also change and influence events, and they have small victories, unlike the Greek chorus. Iris secures a job as a Golden Girl permanent model. To save Sidney further embarrassment, Iris tells him that Wally is "owned." Gloria has the fortitude to quit being a hooker, even if she cannot cope with the outside world. More than anyone else, she understands David's homosexuality. Mavis questions Sidney's business deals and Gloria's way of life, but she tries to understand ideas different from her own.

The political subplot of the play borders on the simplistic. Man is discovered to be a part of the political machine, but he still believes that he can "do good." The man is Wally O'Hara, candidate for an unspecified office. Here is an ambiguity which renders the campaign both universal and commonplace.

What gives this political cliche vitality is the involvement of Sidney Brustein, the floundering intellectual. After proclaiming his apolitical stand,
Sidney makes a rather rapid conversion to Wally's cause, the main reason being his concern for Sal Peretti. Although Sal is mentioned only twice, the audience learn that he is a seventeen year-old boy who swept floors for Sidney at the Silver Dagger and whose involvement with narcotics has left him near death. Understandably, Sidney is taken by Wally's argument that he wants to rid the community of crime, narcotics, and the "machine."

Wally himself is an attractive candidate. He is a successful lawyer with a sense of humour. Furthermore, he can quote Thoreau as well as Sidney. Aware of the women's movement, he engages in a little Coterie wit: "woman's place is in the oven" (24). Sidney mistakes his glibness for sincerity and devotes himself without reservation to the campaign. After learning of Wally's deception, Sidney could easily revert to his apathetic cynical state. Wally enters making direct threats, telling Sidney to ignore the narcotics traffic, warning him that his newspaper will be destroyed. But Sidney can no longer accept corruption or the cruelties of man against man. Hansberry is endowed with a mythological sense, and
perhaps saw Sidney Brustein as a modern-day version of the Fisher King myth. In essence, the Fisher King society of Wally is sterile and corrupt. It will prevail only as long as its members are spiritually dead. To Hansberry, spiritual decay was tantamount to a lack of commitment, yet both can be reversed. With commitment comes renewal of both self and society. Hansberry thought it possible to make the water pure again.

Sidney's friend, Alton Scales, epitomizes black identity and pride. When Iris playfully accuses him of being a "white boy playing black boy," he replies, "I am a black boy... I am going to make a point out of being one" (41). Alton is an ex-communist. He talks about revolution, but he turns out to be as bound by his prejudices as the rest of the presumably emancipated characters in the play. Although he is instrumental in Sidney's first-act decision to turn political, his primary function in the play lies in his relationship with Gloria. A better scene about racial sensitivity is the one in which Iris and Sidney learn, in a letter from Gloria, that Alton has proposed to her. Their
response to the news is an embarrassed silence that comes from their knowledge of Gloria's profession. That uneasy moment reveals the latent suspicion likely to lie at the heart of interracial friendship. Unfortunately the scene is effective only in retrospect, for the audience, not yet possessing the secret about Gloria, can only share Alton's doubts about Sidney and Iris.

When Alton discovers that Gloria is a prostitute, he breaks their engagement and tells Sidney rather than her. In his long speech, his reasons are tied to his colour.

Don't you know this? I am running from being a commodity. How do you think I got the color I am, Sidney? Haven't you ever thought about it? I got this color from my grandmother being used as a commodity, man. The buying and selling in this country began with me. Jesus, help me ... you don't understand ... My father, you know, he was a railroad porter... who wiped up spit and semen,... And my mother... she was a domestic. She always had, Mama did ... bits of this and bits of that from the pantry of "Miss Lady," you know ... some given, some stolen. (101-102)
He almost screams, "I ain't going to have the white man's leavings in my house, no mo'! I ain't going to have his throw-away ... no mo'!" (102).

Lorraine Hansberry explains, "Alton... could not consciously have known the day before that he could have made such an assessment of the woman he loved." The hour for the unequivocal dignity of the black man had arrived and prevented his taking white man's leftovers. "He could not, if his life depended on it, transplant his decision." Alton himself is guilty of racism when he admits that he could accept and forgive a past of prostitution, if the woman he loved were black. Their love was a casualty of the white man's oppression of the black—a history which Alton could not forgive. On the sketch she gives of Alton, Lorraine Hansberry goes back to the theme of black identity but examines it in a perspective which sees not only black assertiveness about racial dignity but also the black prejudice against the white. It is in this comprehensiveness of vision that Lorraine Hansberry's universality can be seen.
Although Alton's speech to Sidney is presumably true in one sense, it is also a reflection of wounded male vanity, as Sidney's line, "Just don't act like a fraternity boy meeting his own girl under the lamppost" (100), implies. In his reaction, Alton is a standard character. In Alton's big scene, the audience is asked to respond sympathetically to his speech and at the same time recognize that he is acting the conventional villain's part (the deserter).

David is perhaps the most complex character in the play. At first he seems little more than a vehicle for satirizing absurdist plays. But David is an attractive, soft-spoken homosexual genuinely devoted to his art and to selected friends among whom are Sidney and Iris.

Many absurdist plays take place in one room, reinforcing the concept of modern man's entrapment in a ridiculous life. Thus David's setting his play in a refrigerator carries absurdist connotations to a ridiculous extreme. Intolerant of marriage, religion, government, and other institutions, absurdist plays stress the difficulty of human, communications. David's play, therefore is an
unemotional stab at homosexual marriage. David's characters are not necessarily suicidal, but their marriage is sterile and exhibits hostility to usual social commitments.

A careful observer of human behaviour, David is a sensitive recorder of human experience and a disciplined craftsman who strives for integrity in his work. David's personal life is not so well ordered as his writing career. Apparently, David has been searching for his childhood friend Nelson ever since. Unlike Max, David is not looking for an easy mark in a bar. At the same time, David's sexuality is rooted in the myths of childhood. By freezing Nelson in time as a seven-year-old, David does not confront mature homosexuality.

David however comes into his finest moment, when he refuses to compromise his integrity. Iris has left Sidney because she wants "something to happen" in her life. Still in a state of euphoria over his success, David is even considering having his phone unlisted and misses the import of what Sidney is asking him to do — at first. Unable to look David
in the eye, Sidney says: "Write her into your play, David. Something for her. Something simple that she can do. With dancing" (92). Compounding his error, Sidney even offers to review the play. David becomes increasingly outraged:

Such a tiny little corruption. Not three people in the whole world would ever really care whether or not my little insignificant play did or did not have its unities stretched to just happen to include a part for your wife in trade for a patch of glowing praise in your paper. Not three people in the world. That's the magic of the tiny corruptions, isn't it, Sidney? Their insignificance makes them so appealing. (93)

David is shocked that Sidney asks him to violate the unities of absurdist drama, but he is appalled at the thought of compromising his personal integrity, and Sidney's and Iris's too, in order to accommodate an actress of little promise. He is honest with himself and with others, at least when his art is involved.
Near the end of the play, David makes Gloria a proposition that many people would consider perverted. He wants her to watch while he and another man make love. His partner is a "beautiful burnished golden boy" from the distinguished New England who wants a young woman of his own class present. David's manner in asking is respectful, quiet, and strained. He would find his lover the "snows of Himalayas" if he desired them. Awkward as this situation is, David has rediscovered the Nelson of his childhood in another man. David the artist and David the lover merge into one of the few characters in the play who are committed, involved, and caring.

In sharp contrast to David is the painter Max, a minor character whose presence on stage, though short, tells the audience all that they need to know. Max has no sense of history. He hates Michelangelo. His free-form paintings lack a real sense of colour or design. Hansberry uses Max as another example of the uncommitted. He is casual about his work. As the art consultant for Sidney's newspaper, he tenders improper advice. He wants to
An aging macho type, he is torn between eating dinner with Iris, Sidney, and Alton and meeting a "chick" at the Black Knight Tavern. Alton says, "The loins triumph! See, Max you're not a true primitive or you would have put food first! You only paint like a savage." (38) Max leaves for the Black Tavern and does not return.

Despite his sporadic emotional torture, David is committed and therefore a fulfilled being who gives more than he takes. Iris and Sidney are searching for fulfilment, sometimes at cross purposes, and sometimes meeting with failure. Yet the search for commitment continues, because they care. Gloria could not recognize her own power. And Max — shallow as he is — does not deserve a last name.

More than anything else, The Sign in Sidney Brustein's Window is a play by a Black woman writer about intellectual commitment and human dignity. It contains within itself the complex response of a very mature writer to the human condition.
Max Lerner dubbed Brustein a "limbo play," one that is "full of insights, striking characters, fine writing, even theatrical brilliance ... in (which) the playwright ... has not broken through with that touch of finality..." 7

Hansberry negates Absurd drama and the intellectual position behind it by not only giving her play a fairly clear plot, a design, and delineating well realized characters, but also by talking about and discussing absurdity and the great metaphysical questions. Unlike most Absurd dramatists, she is consciously literary and believes that Black drama can be a force for the much needed alteration of American sensibility. Indirectly what she is doing in this play is to negate the Absurdity of the world-view of her fellow Black writers who overturn the value system in their quest for a "Black aesthetic." With her firm intellectual grasp of the problem of existence, Hansberry contributes a fine play to the American dramatic tradition.
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