

# The Diana Sands Story®

*Diana Sands rockets to fame on Broadway, film and television before her stunning and tragic death from cancer at age thirty-nine. Like James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Dorothy Dandridge, Gilda Radner, Bobby Darin and other stars of phenomenal magnitude and early promise; Diana's spirit, beauty and magnetism remain forever young. Her brief yet inspiring life, deeply mourned at its loss thirty-one years ago, reverberates to this day. Diana Sands' cousin, Kathryn D. Leary, tells the story in a powerful, intimate portrait.*

## OVERVIEW

At age 25, Diana Sands exploded onto the theatrical scene as the ingénue Beneatha in the legendary Broadway production of *A Raisin in the Sun*. Drawing rave reviews in an ensemble cast of proven talents including Sidney Poitier, Claudia McNeil, Ruby Dee and Louis Gossett, Jr., Diana walked away with the coveted "Outer Circle Award for Outstanding Performance in a Dramatic Role" for the 1958-59 Broadway season. That was just the beginning of a phenomenal and revolutionary career.

For the next 14 years—in roles ranging from the classics *St. Joan* and *Cleopatra* to contemporary drama and comedy, she won 3 Tony and Emmy nominations and became a regular "guest" performer on hit television programs. Despite the relentless barriers of typecasting and prejudice, she kept opening new doors. In 1964, pioneering the concept of "color-blind casting," Diana Sands astonishingly beat out Judy Garland, Glynis Johns, Shelley Winters and Eva Marie Saint for the lead role opposite Alan Alda in Broadway's *The Owl and the Pussycat*. Not a single word in the script was revised to reflect her race. With her brilliant comedic performance, she earned the title "star".

Diana's film career—just fully blossoming at the time of her death—included the now classic *A Raisin in the Sun*, and Maya Angelou's *Georgia, Georgia*; co-starring with Gene Hackman, Carroll O'Connor, Ralph Bellamy, Richard Crenna and Dyan Cannon in *Doctor's Wives*; and opposite Beau Bridges in *The Landlord*, assured her a place in movie history.

Diana's personal life was as rich, colorful, triumphant and tragic as her acting career. While her craft came first—always—Diana fought for civil rights, partied hard, laughed robustly and often, and reveled in the love of close family and friends. Yet, pain struck deep in her most intimate relationships. With grit and grace, she endured, survived and ultimately triumphed in a life cut way too short following her battle with a rare form of cancer—at a time when the very word "cancer" was still whispered in secret.

To a diverse and curious public, theater buffs and movie enthusiasts, Diana Sands' private life remains an enigma. Actors rising in the profession today and a younger generation of women—particularly African Americans—seeking new and different role models turn to her legend for inspiration. I know this is true because actors, both famous and rising, frequently share with me the impact of Diana's legacy in their lives. Diana has served as my role model, mentor and soul inspiration from the time I was seven and first saw her perform, to this day.

And now, approaching the 50th anniversary of *A Raisin in the Sun* and on the heels of the first-ever Broadway revival of this landmark play (featuring Sean Combs and Phylicia Rashad), Diana Sands' name is being invoked by fans, historians and theater critics, alike. Prominently featured in recent theatrical memoirs by Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis, Sidney Poitier, and producer Philip Rose, and with a growing Internet following, Diana Sands is, again, ready for her close-up.

By Kathryn D. Leary