

Self-made powerhouse

THROUGH powerful performances, **Sidney Poitier**, 35, has reached a summit never achieved by another Negro: stardom and a six-figure income as an actor rather than as a song-and-dance man. He credits his success to "luck and pliable looks—I can play men from 25 to 45." He plays a man his own age in *A Raisin in the Sun*, the Broadway hit written by a Negro playwright, Lorraine Hansberry, 28.

This month Poitier is also seen as Porgy



Sidney Poitier: actor at the summit.

in the movie opera, *Porgy and Bess*, in which his songs were sung for him by Robert McFerrin. Although he sang a folk blues in *The Defiant Ones*—the film that won him an Academy Award nomination—Poitier insists, surprisingly, that he is tone-deaf.

But he has plenty of acting offers, including parts not originally designated for a Negro, at \$200,000 a picture plus a share of the profits.

"I look for a story that is honest and makes audiences feel mankind is worth while," Poitier says. He found both in *Raisin*, which dramatizes the clashing dreams of a Negro family in a Chicago slum. His intensity and panther-like movements in the play have whittled nine pounds off his lean, 6'2", 185-pound frame. Before every performance,



he goes through a ritual of calisthenics "to sharpen the muscles to the point of command."

One of eight children born to a Caribbean tomato farmer, Poitier (pronounced Pwa-ti-eh) chafed at accepting menial jobs in Nassau, Miami and New York. He finally auditioned for the American Negro Theatre—and flunked. He could barely read and his singsong Carib accent made it impossible for him to be understood. Mortified but determined, Poitier invested \$14 in a radio and bought stacks of newspapers and magazines. He taught himself to speak clearly and to read well in six months, and successfully passed his second audition.

The movie *Blackboard Jungle* gave Poitier a meaty role that displayed his explosive style before large audiences. He later reinforced the sledge-hammer impact of his acting with his work in *Something of Value* and *The Defiant Ones*. In his next movie, *All the Young Men*, Poitier plays the sergeant of an all-white platoon in Korea.

Poitier and his wife, Juanita, a former dancer, live in Mount Vernon, New York, in a 14-room house echoing with the noises of their three daughters, aged three to seven.

—MARK NICHOLS

Coronet

July, 1959 p. 14