Blues for an Alabama Sky
by PEARL CLEAGE
directed by NICOLE A. WATSON
January 28 – March 12, 2023
Wurtele Thrust Stage

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The Guthrie creates transformative theater experiences that ignite the imagination, stir the heart, open the mind and build community through the illumination of our common humanity.

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“Everybody in Harlem is singing the blues.”

– Angel Allen in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*

About This Guide

This play guide is designed to fuel your curiosity and deepen your understanding of a show’s history, meaning and cultural relevance so you can make the most of your theatergoing experience. You might be reading this because you fell in love with a show you saw at the Guthrie. Maybe you want to read up on a play before you see it onstage. Or perhaps you’re a fellow theater company doing research for an upcoming production. We’re glad you found your way here, and we encourage you to dig in and mine the depths of this extraordinary story.

**NOTE:** Sections of this play guide may evolve throughout the run of the show, so check back often for additional content.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Thanks for your interest in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. Please direct literary inquiries to Resident Dramaturg Carla Steen at carlas@guthrietheater.org.
The Play

**Synopsis**

In a Harlem apartment building, four close-knit friends have developed a warm, nurturing relationship, sharing in each other’s aspirations and challenges. Angel, a struggling nightclub singer, is the temporary roommate of Guy, a costume designer who dreams of creating beautiful dresses for Josephine Baker, a popular performer in Paris. Across the hall is Delia, a social worker diligently trying to open a Margaret Sanger Family Planning Clinic in Harlem. Sam, a physician at Harlem Hospital, doesn’t live in the building, but his blooming romance with Delia and friendship with Angel and Guy make him a regular addition to this found family.

Their lives are thrown into disarray with the arrival of Leland, a conservative newcomer to Harlem who is smitten with Angel. Even though Angel is put off by his narrow beliefs, she encourages the relationship because she believes Leland will give her a secure future. When Angel discovers she is pregnant, she makes a decision that leads to devastating consequences for everyone.

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**Setting**

“It is the summer of 1930. Harlem, New York. The creative euphoria of the Renaissance has given way to the harsher realities of the Great Depression. Young Reverend Adam Clayton Powell is feeding the hungry and preaching an activist gospel at Abyssinian Baptist Church. Black Nationalist visionary Marcus Garvey has been discredited and deported. Birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger is opening a new family planning clinic on 126th Street and the doctors at Harlem Hospital are scrambling to care for a population whose most deadly disease is poverty. But, far from Harlem, African American expatriate extraordinaire, Josephine Baker, sips champagne in her dressing room at the *Folies Bergère* and laughs like a free woman.”

Playwright Pearl Cleage

“Time and Place” from the published version of *Blues for an Alabama Sky*

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**Characters**

- **Angel Allen**, a former backup singer at the Cotton Club
- **Guy Jacobs**, a costume designer at the Cotton Club
- **Delia Patterson**, a social worker on staff at a Margaret Sanger Family Planning Clinic
- **Sam Thomas**, a doctor at Harlem Hospital
- **Leland Cunningham**, a six-week resident of Harlem, from Alabama
Pearl Cleage on
Blues for an Alabama Sky

My husband and I had just attended a production of my play Flyin’ West at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in Montgomery, Alabama. The day I was scheduled to give a short presentation and engage the audience in some Q&A happened to be the day the Ku Klux Klan was marching around the state capital a few miles away to protest the Martin Luther King, Jr. national holiday.

I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and as I recall, I did a little bit of both. Later that night, we were driving back to Atlanta through the Alabama night, and the sky was full of the kind of bright stars you never see in the city. It was so beautiful, I opened the window and hung my head out to see as much of that sky as I could. I found myself wondering what it would be like to leave a place where you could see the sky like this and journey to New York City, where neon lights often trump starlight from our vantage point in the middle of all those skyscrapers. I thought how much a person might miss that sky. That was the beginning of the idea that grew into Blues for an Alabama Sky. …

The story is set in 1930, but it isn’t about 1930. It’s about truth and honor and love and fear and friendship, topics which don’t grow old. Writers are always writing about the complexities of being human. Time and place are merely the specific backdrops in which we chose to place our explorations. If we get it right about the people, the question of relevance is moot.

Interview with Jacqueline E. Lawton
“An Interview With Pearl Cleage Part Two,” 2011

When I set Blues in the middle of the Harlem Renaissance, I realized we always write about it as a period of wonderful creative energy ... people were in an opportunistic moment making great work. But once the stock market crashed, a lot of that money dried up and lots of artists were in worse times — especially Black artists. I was more interested in placing a story, I realized, in that time when a lot of that hope and artistry had dried up and how different people reacted to it. Angel responds with absolute fear. Guy’s response is to pursue a moment beyond the present and to become a citizen of the world.

Interview with Shelby Krick
“In Conversation With Playwright Pearl Cleage & Director Ron OJ Parson,” Court Theatre blog, January 15, 2017
What was it like to be Angel? What was it like to be Guy? What was it like to be all of those people and realize ... they were dealing with contraception, that the Garveyites were saying, “That is genocide. No Black women should be using contraception. We should be having as many babies as we can.” ...

Sometimes there are issues that women have been dealing with for generations, but they haven’t shown up in the literature because men are writing the plays. Men are writing the novels, and they have different issues that they’re dealing with. But for me, if I can be reading about another period and just see it bump up against the issues that we are dealing with now as women, it’s just wonderful, because then you can bring that conversation into the light where it’s only been in the smaller spaces that we inhabit when it’s just us. ...

I get most of my history through stories. My husband can name all the wars in chronological order and all the presidents in chronological order. My mind does not work that way. So the history that I get, I get from stories, from plays, from novels. I’ve always been that way, so the history that I get, I get from stories, from plays, from novels. I’ve always been that way, so there are periods that are of great interest to me, not necessarily because I want to write a history play, but because the Harlem Renaissance has always been so appealing to me. I wish I had been there. When I wrote *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, I was thinking about the Renaissance, but then I said, “We always kind of glory in the Renaissance. What happened right after that? What happened when the stock market crashed?” But it grew out of my interest in the Harlem Renaissance.

*Interview with Jordan Ealey and Leticia Ridley*


I haven’t seen a production of [*Blues for an Alabama Sky*] in almost 20 years. I tend to not follow the productions because you can get seduced by your own work that’s done rather than create the new one, which is scarier because it isn’t done. I did reexamine it to make sure I felt that it stood up after 20 years, and it does. Some of the issues that I was trying to grapple with in the play are still very present in American life; birth control and issues of homophobia are still very alive. Also, the heart of this play is about the importance of telling the truth. You can’t be a good friend to someone and lie. You can’t tell someone you love them and not mean it. That’s not something that goes in and out of style.

*Interview with Kelundra Smith*

Responses to the Play

Cleage isn’t afraid to wear her theater geekery on her sleeve, stuffing an old-fashioned melodrama with sly winks to Ibsen and Tennessee Williams, but the issues she addresses [in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*] are freshly resonant in a new depression rife with social conservatism.

Claire Armitstead
“The Harlem Renaissance Drama Is a Tale for Our Times,” The Guardian, October 5, 2022

Pearl Cleage’s 1995 [*Blues for an Alabama Sky*], set in 1930s Harlem, is hefty in subject matter, with debates about gayness, family planning and racial injustice. Yet this is an evening of individual voices, raggedy with poverty but bold with hope. It flies.

Susannah Clapp
“The week in theatre,” The Guardian, October 9, 2022

What stands out in Cleage’s beautifully written play is that it makes that distant time seem inescapably modern, and with its finely drawn characters and a plot that simmers steadily until it explodes like a dream deferred, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* is one of the most satisfying dramas onstage in New York right now.

Pete Hempstead
“Dreams Deferred and Fulfilled in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*,” TheaterMania, February 21, 2020

Blues paints the truth of living while Black in America without pulling any punches. It plays perfectly for this era of regressive attacks on women’s rights and eroding civil liberties. Even with consideration for the abortion subplot, Cleage could easily update the play to modern time without having to change too much around.

Juan Michael Porter II
“Review: *Blues for an Alabama Sky* at Theatre Row,” Exeunt NYC, February 24, 2020

The cynical might think Pearl Cleage’s play had been expressly written to address the overriding issues in today’s USA — abortion and contraception rights, gun control, homophobia, racism. But the cynical would be wrong, as *Blues for an Alabama Sky* was written in 1995. What is notable is its timely scheduling by the National Theatre.

Cleage has written a period play, set in the Harlem Renaissance during Prohibition, that works as a tribute to the major players of that movement. Their names are bandied about by the characters as their associates and colleagues — the poet Langston Hughes, the birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger, the cabaret star Josephine Baker. None appears in person, but they and their radical notions are in the air.

Helen Hawkins
“*Blues for an Alabama Sky*, National Theatre review,” The Arts Desk, October 22, 2022

I’ve rarely seen a play in which the imprint of identification and affection for the protagonists is so strong and so involving. It’s a work that makes you want to lean in, holding your breath as their fortunes shift and stir, hoping for the best but somehow always fearing the worst.

Sarah Crompton
“*Blues for an Alabama Sky* at the National Theatre — review,” WhatsOnStage, October 5, 2022
About Pearl Cleage

Pearl Cleage is an Atlanta-based writer whose plays include *Angry, Raucous and Shamelessly Gorgeous*, *Flyin’ West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Bourbon at the Border*, which were commissioned by Alliance Theatre where Cleage is Distinguished Artist in Residence.

She is also the author of *A Song for Coretta*, written in 2007 while the Cosby Professor in Women’s Studies at Spelman College, and *The Nacirema Society*..., which was commissioned by Alabama Shakespeare Festival and premiered in 2010. Cleage’s *Blues for an Alabama Sky* recently received an award-winning production at London’s National Theatre, directed by Lynette Linton. Her plays have been performed at Arena Stage, Hartford Stage, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Huntington Theatre Company, Long Wharf Theatre, Just Us Theatre Company, True Colors Theatre, Bushfire Theatre, Intiman Theatre, The Black Rep and 7 Stages.

Cleage is also an accomplished performance artist, often working with her husband, writer Zaron W. Burnett, Jr., in their *Live at Club Zebra*! performance installation. They have performed at the National Black Arts Festival, National Black Theatre Festival and colleges across the country. They also collaborated with performance artists Idris Ackamoor and Rhodessa Jones on the script for *The Love Project*, which premiered at the National Black Theatre Festival in 2008. Cleage is an accomplished novelist, with her *New York Times* bestseller *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* being chosen for Oprah’s Book Club. Cleage has been awarded grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, Fulton County Arts Council, Georgia Council for the Arts, Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs and The Coca-Cola Foundation. Among her many awards is a 2008 NAACP Image Award for Fiction and a 2022 Lifetime Achievement Award from the Dramatists Guild.

Through [her] plays, [Pearl] Cleage seeks to bring us to grips with our American past and help us understand and acknowledge its impact on present conditions, especially with regard to issues of race and gender. She examines great historical events and movements, not through the eyes of leaders and celebrities, but through the experiences of the ordinary people who lived them. The issue at hand and its relationship to our actions remains the focus rather than the impersonation of an iconic figure. Cleage’s interest is in helping us face our responsibility for being part of the flow of history.

Freda Scott Giles

From her days wandering library stacks in Detroit to becoming Atlanta’s first Poet Laureate in 2020, Playwright Pearl Cleage has never stopped writing. She discovered the joy of storytelling at a young age and has spent her career at the intersection of artistry and activism — a place she didn’t choose but chose to embrace. It was an honor to interview Cleage, whose answers offer a beautiful look into her creative upbringing and the impetus for writing *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, which continues to engage audiences across the country.

**JOHANNA BUCH:** When did you know you wanted to become a writer?

**PEARL CLEAGE:** I’ve always known I was a writer. I started by telling stories to my older sister when I was 3 and keeping little notebooks with story and character ideas once she taught me to read and write at age 5. I was one of those kids who organized my cousins into a troupe of performers during any and all holidays. I even adapted *Chicken Little* in the fourth grade and took the performance to other classes at my school! My family always encouraged me to write, and our house was full of books. I got my first library card to the Detroit Public Library at age 6, and my mother told the librarian I was allowed to check out any book that interested me. This gave me the freedom to leave the children’s area and roam about the entire library at will.

**JB:** Give us a peek into your writing process. What do you need to create your best work?

**PC:** I need a room where I can be alone with my thoughts. It doesn’t have to be a big room — just a room where nothing else happens but my writing. I like to play music when I write, anything from Bob Marley to Joni Mitchell. I burn lots of candles. In the summer, I bring in flowers from my husband’s garden. I also need a room with a door because I always read my plays out loud to see how the words will sound and be sure I leave enough space for the actors to breathe!

**JB:** You’ve written plays, novels, essays, children’s books and more. What excites you about playwriting?

**PC:** Writing plays is the best of all possible worlds. It allows you the solitary time that serious writing demands, but once the script is done, you become part of a group of artists who bring the play to life. You also have the great joy of sitting in the theater and hearing the audience respond how you hoped they would. There is no better feeling.

**JB:** In addition to being a prolific writer, you’re also an activist. How have these identities fueled each other throughout your career?

**PC:** I grew up in a very political family. We were always involved in the struggles of African American people to be free. The family published a weekly newspaper called *The Illustrated News* and founded the Michigan Freedom Now Party. I always saw my work as part of that struggle. I still do.

**JB:** In your 2015 interview with *American Theatre* magazine, you said that Harlem Renaissance tales...
were your childhood bedtime stories. How did they influence your work — *Blues for an Alabama Sky* in particular?

PC: My mother was a great admirer of Langston Hughes, and she often read from his autobiography, *The Big Sea*. The stories of his Harlem adventures fascinated me. I loved his descriptions of rent parties, nightclubs and friendships formed on the stoops of apartment buildings. I wanted to be part of the Harlem Renaissance but realized I was too late. Writing *Blues for an Alabama Sky* allowed me to revisit those childhood dreams of living and writing in Harlem — and maybe even being a friend of Langston Hughes.

JB: When and where did the initial spark for *Blues* originate? Did you imagine the characters first, the vibrant Harlem setting or something else?

PC: My husband and I were driving back to Atlanta from Montgomery late one night. It was dark, but the sky was filled with stars. Looking out the window at that beautiful Alabama sky made me wonder what it would be like to leave a small town like Tuskegee, where that sky is always available to you, and find yourself in the middle of New York City where the buildings and the neon block out so much of that night sky. That’s where the character of Leland was born. The other characters were already part of the Harlem demimonde, and their friendships were already established. When Angel’s fear of being “a broke old woman” makes her invite Leland into their circle, he is not ready. His homophobia and small-town, traditional Christianity make it impossible for him to understand and embrace these big-city people, although Angel’s resemblance to his late wife makes him keep trying.

JB: The play’s ending has changed since it first premiered. What insight can you offer?

PC: The ending we now use is the original ending! The new gentleman caller stopping the same way Leland does shows us that Angel has not really changed. She even uses the same line: “Hot enough for you?” She has only one way of moving through the world, and that is to find a man to take care of her. She wishes it could be Guy, but as she reminds him, he’s not a “straight man” and cannot be her savior. During the play’s first production, the budget didn’t allow for that final character, so I hoped Angel sitting alone would convey the same message. But the ambiguity of her last moments were sometimes misinterpreted as remorse, and Angel has no remorse. She is always about her own survival. With the original ending restored, there is no way to see her as a changed woman. She is who she is.

JB: What will we see next from Pearl Cleage?

PC: As an African American woman, I live at the crossroads of racism and sexism. That is not what I would choose, but it’s what I was born into. When I write, I explore characters who, like me, find themselves confronted with other people’s ideas of who they are and who they should be. I am saddened to see that reproductive rights are still under assault in our country. Homophobia, racism and sexism are still huge problems. These characters are struggling to live their lives as free people. The question becomes: What does freedom mean to each one, and what are they prepared to do to get it?

JB: Exciting! Anything else you’d like to share?

PC: I am delighted to have *Blues for an Alabama Sky* at the Guthrie. I hope your audiences find in these characters some people they want to spend a few hours with and that the journey of the play sparks discussion of where we are as a country, where we’ve been and where we’re going. I also hope, in Doc’s words, that it allows us all to “let the good times roll!”
In Her Own Words

I grew up on the West Side of Detroit, Michigan. My family had already been there for two generations when I was born. ... My father, Rev. Albert Cleage, was very active in the Freedom Struggle (the civil rights movement), and I don’t remember a time when I wasn’t going to meetings, handing out flyers and participating in picket lines and election day activities. It was a big part of our lives. Being an active part of the community we lived in was simply part of who we were as a family.

My grandfather was the first African American city physician in Detroit and helped found a Black hospital. My other grandfather came North during the Great Migration to take Henry Ford up on his offer of a job for anybody who wanted to work, and he kept that job for 40 years. He was also a founding trustee of Plymouth Congregational Church, the city’s first African American congregational church, where he remained an active member until he died. My grandmothers were lucky to be able to stay home to raise their children and not have to do outside work, although both might have preferred it. One wanted to be a concert singer and one had very much wanted to go to college.

I enjoyed politics and often accompanied my father to political meetings at our church and around the city. My stepfather, Henry Cleage, and two of my other uncles, Hugh Cleage and Dr. Louis Cleage, owned and operated a printing plant where my family published a weekly called The Illustrated News. The issues of the day were analyzed and strategies for change were offered, including voter registration, economic boycotts and the founding of the Freedom Now Party. My father ran for governor of Michigan at the top of the party’s statewide ticket while I was in high school. ...

My family believed in Black Nationalism, and I grew up seeing myself in that way. We lived separately within Detroit’s Black community by choice. My entire world was African American at every level, and it never seemed strange or tragic to me. Detroit didn’t have the visible signs of legal segregation that we saw in the South, but discriminatory housing patterns made it easy for communities to be all one race or another. Mine was all Black. Black teachers, Black doctors, Black factory workers, Black bookstore owners, Black lawyers, Black elected officials. Anything we needed, we were able to find Black people who could provide that service. I later went to historically Black colleges, published my first books with independent Black presses and built a reputation as a playwright working within the national network of African American theaters.

Aside from my political education, one of the great gifts my family gave me was a real respect for writing and writers. They supported the young writers who were revolutionizing American poetry and were always encouraging my desire to be a writer, although I think they worried about how I would make a living at it. My parents always had lots of books around, and I was encouraged and allowed to read anything that caught my eye from Jean-Paul Sartre to Frantz Fanon. Langston Hughes was my mother’s favorite, so I read a lot of his work when I was very young. It made me see how exciting a writer’s life could be. I couldn’t wait!

Interview with Morgan Mims
“Making a Life in the Theatre,” HowlRound Theatre Commons, June 4, 2016
I grew up feeling that the spoken word is so much more powerful sometimes because everybody can’t read, everybody doesn’t like to read. People get out of high school and say, “Oh, I never have to read another book,” which of course makes those of us who are writers cringe a little bit. But those of us who are playwrights get to cheat because they don’t have to read the play. What we have to do is figure out a way to get them into the theater, and then we get to tell them the story. That’s really what drew me to theater; you can tell stories to people in a way that is so ancient and accessible because sitting around the campfire, really, is what we do. We turn out the lights, we sit among the people in our community, we have a light that we look at and somebody tells us a story. You really can’t get more ancient than that.

That’s what playwriting felt like to me, like you could get people to come together and then talk to them. ... When I was about 11 years old, the touring company of A Raisin in the Sun from the Negro Ensemble Company came through Detroit, and my mother took me. I was so moved and energized and just excited by what Lorraine Hansberry was doing.

**Interview with Jordan Ealey and Leticia Ridley**


My response to the oppression I face is to name it, describe it, analyze it, protest it and propose solutions to it as loud[ly] as I possibly can every time I get the chance. I purposely people my plays with fast-talking, quick-thinking Black women since the theater is, for me, one of the few places where we have a chance to get an uninterrupted word in edgewise.

**From her essay “Fast-Talking, Quick-Thinking Black Women”**

*Women in American Theatre* by Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins, 2006

Flyin’ West was the first play I ever did that was historical. I had one of those experiences that I never have, where I heard a character speak to me. I heard a complete monologue where a woman talked about surviving slavery and having 10 children sold away and setting out to walk West. I wanted to honor the fact that I heard this voice. I had been doing this long enough to recognize a sign.

**Interview with Kelundra Smith**

Harlem: Black Dreams of the Promised Land

Pearl Cleage’s contemporary classic *Blues for an Alabama Sky* is a work of historical fiction, meaning the story, while fictionalized, takes place in a very real past. The play is set in Harlem, New York City, in the summer of 1930. It is a time of great transition for African Americans, from the creative exhilaration of the Harlem Renaissance to the despair of the Great Depression to the migration from the Jim Crow South to cities in the North.

From roughly the 1910s to the mid-1970s, approximately six million Black Southerners left their homes and relocated to Northern, Midwestern and Western states in a mass movement known as the Great Migration. It was one of the largest migrations of people in the 20th century. Sharecroppers from Mississippi, tobacco workers from Virginia and millions of others from small towns and villages in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Kentucky, Arkansas, Florida, Tennessee and North Carolina made the quiet and courageous decision to pick up their belongings and move to cities they had only heard about or seen in mail-order catalogs.

They left because the threat of racial violence was palpable. Across the South, between 1889 and 1929, someone was hanged or burned alive every four days. They left because they wanted their children to have better educational and economic opportunities than their own. And they left because the stifling conditions of Jim Crow laws made living in the South untenable. The racial caste system of Jim Crow was conceived to disenfranchise African Americans and reverse political and economic gains made during Reconstruction. Under “separate but equal” Jim Crow laws, the
lives of African Americans were legally relegated to the status of second-class citizens.

The Great Migration serves as the backdrop in Cleage’s bittersweet play *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. Angel and Guy would have been part of that migration, having left a life of sexual exploitation at Miss Lillie’s in Savannah, Georgia, and fleeing North with dreams of a better future. The cities of the North beckoned millions, with New York City, Detroit, Chicago and Los Angeles being the most popular destinations. In New York City, for African Americans, the place to be was Harlem, a large neighborhood near the tip of Manhattan. By 1930, Harlem was internationally known as the largest Black community in the U.S. It was the cultural capital for Black Americans; it was the Black mecca of the New Negro.

The Wecquaesgeek tribe of the Wappani people were the first inhabitants of what we now know as Harlem. By 1930, Harlem had a rich ethnic history. After the Dutch settlements established in 1658, Harlem became home to Irish, German, Italian and Jewish immigrants. The conversion of Harlem into a Black neighborhood is widely believed to have begun in 1904 following a speculative construction boom. Motivated by the creation of a new subway line, greedy speculators overbuilt poor-quality housing and overestimated rental values. The resulting abandoned properties pressured desperate building owners to make their apartments available to Black residents while also overcharging them. In the 1920s, many West Indian migrants began to make their way to Harlem as well.

With the influx of newcomers from the South and immigrants from the Caribbean, plus native New Yorkers, Harlem’s population of Black residents developed into a thriving community and
grew exponentially, expanding from 84,000 in 1920 to more than 200,000 in 1930 with fewer than 25% being born in New York. There were more Blacks in Harlem in 1930 than the combined Black populations of Birmingham, Memphis and St. Louis.

For many, Harlem was the dream capital of Black America. New arrivals would often land at Penn Station and take the A train uptown where they would be greeted by friends and relatives who had already made the trip North. The jobs found in New York were menial but paid better than the low wages in the South, and public schools for their children were a substantial improvement over those in Southern climes.

The mixture of native New Yorkers, newer migrants from the South and Caribbean immigrants was not always smooth. There was an inherent tension between the authoritarian control under Jim Crow as experienced in the rural South and the relatively individualistic behaviors found in the large, anonymous cities of the North. Without the full force of family surrounding them, migrants got their first taste of anonymity in the city. Values that were held so dearly at home within an extended family could be relaxed in the North. Even the choice of a church could be made without familial pressure. In *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Leland is a newcomer to Harlem who holds tightly to his Southern and conservative religious values. His convictions lead to an inevitable conflict of social mores between himself and the found family that Angel, Guy, Delia and Sam have built in the North.

*Blues for an Alabama Sky* presents many questions about dreams: How much do you risk to fulfill your dreams? When is it time to give up on your dreams? In the 1920s and 1930s, Harlem was a place of promise for many. For some, the dream died; for others, it was deferred. But for many years, Harlem was the place where Black dreams could come true.
People, Places and Things in the Play

**PEOPLE**

**Josephine Baker (1906–1975)**
An American-born dancer, singer, actress and activist. She emigrated to France in the 1920s and found great success with her jaw-dropping performances and skimpy costumes. During World War II, she assisted the French Resistance. In the 1960s, she was active in the American civil rights movement and refused to perform for segregated audiences. At the time of the play, Baker was one of Paris’ most popular and highly paid nightclub performers.

**Richard Bruce Nugent (1906–1987)**
An author, artist, actor, dancer and popular personality during the Harlem Renaissance more commonly known as Bruce Nugent. Although there were many artists who were gay in Harlem at that time, Nugent was among only a few who were publicly out. His art explored Black identity and same-sex desire.

**Marcus Garvey (1887–1940)**
A Jamaican-born leader, political activist, publisher, journalist, entrepreneur and orator who was the founder and first president of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League. Ideologically, the organization was a Black Nationalist/pan-African movement that was committed to the diaspora migrating back to Africa. Garvey and his followers, called Garveyites, believed that birth control was a form of genocide for the Black race and were passionately opposed to Margaret Sanger’s birth control clinic in Harlem.

**Adam Clayton Powell Jr. (1908–1972)**
The influential pastor of Harlem’s famed Abyssinian Baptist Church who became an influential figure during the Depression. Against his father’s wishes, he married chorus girl Isabel Washington. Powell began preaching at the church in 1930 and took over the church’s leadership after his father’s retirement in 1937. Powell was elected to Congress in 1945 and represented Harlem in that capacity until 1970.

**Langston Hughes (1901–1967)**
A poet, novelist and social activist who was considered the Poet Laureate of the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes moved to Harlem in 1921. At the time of the play, his debut novel, *Not Without Laughter*, was published, which won a Harmon Gold Medal for Literature. It is believed that Hughes led the entirety of his life as a closeted gay man.

**John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937)**
A billionaire who continues to rank as one of the wealthiest men of modern times. He was the co-founder of Standard Oil and helped shape the oil industry and the practice of corporate philanthropy.

**Margaret Sanger (1879–1966)**
An American birth control activist, writer and nurse. She opened the first birth control clinic in the U.S. and is considered the founder of Planned Parenthood. Sanger believed that in order for women to have more equal footing in society and to lead healthier lives, they needed to be able to determine when to bear children. With support from the *Amsterdam News*, Abyssinian...
Baptist Church, Urban League, W.E.B. Du Bois and others, she opened the Harlem family planning clinic in 1930, which remained open until 1937. In more recent years, Sanger’s belief in eugenics based on class has been denounced.

**Fats Waller (1904–1943)**
An American stride pianist, organist, vocalist and composer known for songs such as “Ain’t Misbehavin’,” “Honeysuckle Rose” and “I Can’t Give You Anything but Love, Baby.” In the 1930s, Waller ranked at the top among African American entertainers.

**Booker T. Washington (1856–1915)**
An American educator, author and orator. He was the leader of the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute (later known as the Tuskegee Institute) for more than 30 years and one of the most influential Black leaders of his time. His philosophy was one of self-help, racial solidarity, moderation and accommodation as strategies for social and economic injustice. Washington’s viewpoint was diametrically opposed to those of scholar W.E.B. Du Bois, who advocated for political action and a civil rights agenda.

**PLACES**

**Cotton Club**
Harlem’s largest and nationally recognized nightclub where everyone who was anyone — movie stars, gangsters, Broadway performers — wanted to spend an evening. Featuring bootleg liquor and musical revues, the club launched the careers of many Black entertainers of the era, including Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith and the Nicholas Brothers, among others. The Cotton Club was initially a whites-only establishment with the rare exception for Black celebrities like Ethel Waters and Bill Robinson. The original club closed in 1940.

**Folies Bergère**
A popular nightclub in Paris that opened in 1869 as a music hall. It reached the height of its fame from the 1890s until World War II. Productions included a series of sumptuous and grandiose musicals featuring beautiful young women scantily clad in gaudy costumes against exotic backdrops. It is still open for business.

**Hamilton Lodge**
An event space located at 280 West 155th Street, also known as the Rockland Palace, that was founded by the Grand Order of Odd Fellows, Lodge 710. It was initially a space for affluent African Americans, providing a home for political events, pageants and lectures. In 1869, Harlem’s annual drag balls began in that space, flourishing by the time of the play. Later in the 1920s, the Masquerade and Civic Ball became the most popular gay event in town. As popularity grew, the balls attracted more than just queer patrons. In 1937, the ball hosted nearly 8,000 guests.

**Harlem**
A district of New York City located in the northern part of Manhattan. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance centered the area with the vibrancy of African American life and culture. There was a proliferation of poetry, dance, theater, music and visual arts during this period, and the night life was in full swing.

**Harlem Hospital**
A modest, three-story health care facility that opened in 1887 and originally served as a holding place for patients to be moved to Bellevue Hospital. The hospital relocated to a larger space in 1907 to help accommodate more citizens in the neighborhood and always offered a sense of pride to Harlem’s Black community. In 1919, the first Black physician was hired.
by the hospital. At the beginning of 1929, only seven of the 64 physicians and surgeons on the in-service staff at Harlem Hospital were African American.

**Lafayette Theatre**
A live theater venue located at 132nd Street and Seventh Avenue in Harlem that operated from 1912 to 1951. In 1913, it became the first major theater to desegregate, allowing African American theatergoers to sit in orchestra seats instead of the balcony. The theater served as the home for the Lafayette Players, an all-Black acting troupe, from 1915 to 1932.

**Savoy Ballroom**
An important center for jazz music and dance in Harlem. On any given night during its heyday in the 1920s and 1930s, you could find up to 5,000 people doing the Lindy Hop, Flying Charleston, Shorty George or any number of fashionable swing dances. The Savoy had two bandstands so there would always be two bands at the ready, guaranteeing the music played nonstop. It was one of the first ballrooms in the U.S. to integrate Black and white patrons. The ballroom eventually closed and was demolished in 1959.

**Sugar Hill**
An area in Harlem that became a popular place for wealthy and prominent African Americans to live during the Harlem Renaissance. The nickname reflected the “sweet life” of its residents.

**Tuskegee**
A small city in Macon County, Alabama, and an iconic location for African American history. It is home to the famed Tuskegee Institute, which hosted both the work of George Washington Carver and the infamous Tuskegee Syphilis Experiments. It is also known for the Tuskegee Airmen, the first African American airmen in the U.S. military.

**Amsterdam News**
A weekly, Black-owned newspaper serving New York City that was founded in 1909. In the 1930s, the paper became a prominent voice for Black Americans.

**Demimonde**
A group of people considered to be on the fringe of respectable society.

**Great Depression**
A period of worldwide economic downturn between 1929 and 1939. Cities around the world were hit hard with devastating consequences, and people greatly suffered from both emotional and financial trauma. By December 1930, the Bank of United States (a private bank in New York City) collapsed. At the time, it was the fourth largest bank in the country. This moment was widely considered to be the event that started the Great Depression.

**Literati**
People interested in literature or the arts.

**Prohibition**
An era in the U.S. that began in 1920 and lasted until 1933. During this era, the 18th Amendment enforced legal prevention of selling, manufacturing and transporting alcoholic beverages. Both federal and national authorities had difficulty enforcing Prohibition, giving rise to “bathtub gin” (amateur homemade spirits) bootleggers (someone who makes or sells illegal spirits) and gangsters.

**Sunday Promenade**
A moment when men and women dressed in their finest attire would stroll down Harlem’s Seventh Avenue after church, feeling and looking good.