DISCOVERY GUIDE

BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY

BY PEARL CLEAGE

DIRECTED BY PHYLICIA RASHAD
**SYNOPSIS**

*Blues for An Alabama Sky* by Pearl Cleage shares the hopes and struggles of five characters whose lives come together in Harlem, New York during the summer of 1930. When the Great Depression turns up the heat, they must find a way to fight for their dreams, their community, and each other without losing themselves. Holding on to their dreams will not be easy for Guy, Angel, Sam, and Delia in the face of economic uncertainty, racism, sexism, and homophobia. But with the fire of the Harlem Renaissance as their fuel, they sure are going to try.

**LAND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

The setting of *Blues for an Alabama Sky* by Pearl Cleage is Harlem, New York. Originally known as Manahatta, (loosely translated as hilly island) it was home to the Lenape people. Center Theatre Group acknowledges, with deep respect, the Lenape peoples continued and ancestral stewardship of this land.
MEET THE CHARACTERS

ANGEL ALLEN
“All revolutions leave a space for dancing. They just like to pretend they don’t.”
a thirty-four-year-old Black Woman who looks five years younger; former background singer at the Cotton Club.

GUY JACOB
“If you ever see me in a fight with a bear, you help the bear.”
a thirtyish Black Man; costume designer at the Cotton Club.

DELIA PATTERSON
“Tease me as much as you want. We’re going to have the best clinic in New York City right up on 126th Street!”
a twenty-five-year-old Black Woman; social worker on staff at the Margaret Sanger Family Planning Clinic.

LELAND CUNNINGHAM
“I grew up on a farm. Old habits are hard to break.”
a twenty-eight-year-old Black Man from Alabama; six-week resident of Harlem.

SAM THOMAS
“It means we still see our best hope in the faces of our children”
a forty-year-old doctor at Harlem Hospital.

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To understand the Harlem Renaissance, it helps to know how and why so many Black folks came to live in Harlem.

The Lenox Avenue IRT subway line was completed in 1904. In anticipation that increased public transportation would make Harlem a desirable neighborhood for people living in lower Manhattan, hundreds of tenement apartment buildings were built. But the development grew too large, too fast, and many apartment buildings and homes remained empty.

Phillip Payton Jr., a Black man, started the Afro-American Realty Company. He approached Harlem landlords with the proposal that he would fill their empty properties with Black tenants. He encouraged Black people to move to Harlem to take advantage of low home prices. The low prices also brought Black institutions, including churches, nightclubs, and printing presses, uptown to Harlem.

“The great displacement” (coined by Lindsay Jenkins), better known as the Great Migration, began in 1915. Natural disasters, lack of opportunity, and ever-changing discriminatory laws, caused over 300,000 Southern African Americans to move north between 1915 and 1920.

Cities like Detroit, Chicago, and Cleveland saw a huge boom in Black population and creative expression. But no place boomed like Harlem. Harlem soon became the largest Black neighborhood in the United States. Black Americans finally had a place where they could freely express the fullness of what it meant to be Black.

“One New York City neighborhood, encompassing only three square miles, teemed with black artists, intellectuals, writers, and musicians. Black-owned businesses, from newspapers, publishing houses, and music companies to nightclubs, cabarets, and theaters, helped fuel the neighborhood’s thriving scene.”

—The Poetry Foundation
“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 Jr. 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.”

—Blues for an Alabama Sky

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

From 1929 to 1939, the American economy collapsed. The stock market crashed, Wall Street fell apart, and bankrupt investors jumped out of windows to end their lives. The Great Depression rocked the country and devastated Black communities such as Harlem.

By 1933, over 15 million Americans had lost their jobs.
Historical fiction takes its audience to a time and place in the past. The details in the story are a mix of actual events and ones from the writers' imagination. In *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, writer Pearl Cleage created five fictional people whose lives intersect with real people, places, and events from the Harlem Renaissance. The historical characters do not appear in the play, but we hear about them through the fictional characters we meet. *Blues for an Alabama Sky* explores the experiences of ordinary people living through historical times; specifically Black artists and activists trying to pursue their dreams as the Harlem Renaissance ended and the Great Depression began.

**Some of the real people mentioned in this play**

**JOSEPHINE BAKER**
An American-born dancer, singer, actress, and activist who moved to France in the 1920s. She assisted the French Resistance during World War II and was an activist in the American Civil Rights Movement. At the time of the play, she was one of Paris’ most popular and highest paid performers.

**ADAM CLAYTON POWELL**
Preacher, Pastor, and Politician, Adam Clayton Powell couldn’t be defined by any of his titles. He was an intellectual but also a man of faith. He was a pastor, but he loved to hang in the clubs with the artists. He was the first Black man to be elected to congress from the Northeast as the representative for New York. He followed in his father's footsteps and became the pastor of Abyssinian Baptist Church (photo), which is still a pillar in the Harlem community today with one of the baddest choirs around.

**RICHARD BRUCE NUGENT**
Writer, painter, and actor. Nugent was one of few artists of the Harlem Renaissance who was open about his sexual orientation. He explored issues of sexuality and Black identity in his poems, short stories, and drawings. In *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, the characters call him “Bruce” and say, “Bruce’s parties require one to be both ravishing and alert.”

**MARGARET SANGER**
Sanger was an activist who helped start the organizations that led to Planned Parenthood. Sanger's mother died of tuberculosis after eleven childbirths and seven miscarriages. Margaret believed the pregnancies were the true cause of her mother's death. She was determined to bring birth control options to all women in the hope to save their lives. She opened a family planning clinic in Harlem led by a Black Physician and a Black social worker. Similar to Marcus Garvey, her fight for freedom led to her aligning herself with groups, including the KKK. She also supported some of the work of eugenics (the study of how to arrange reproduction within a human population to increase the occurrence of heritable characteristics regarded as desirable).

**MARCUS GARVEY**
The founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League (UNIA-ACL, commonly known as UNIA). Garvey was a Black Nationalist and Pan-Africanist. He strongly believed in the unification of all peoples in the African diaspora. A staunch Black separatist, he even developed strong relationships with KKK members finding common ground on the separation of the races. He was very vocal about the Back-To-Africa movement and strongly encouraged Black people to make their way home to Africa. In *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, you will hear people who followed his teachings referred to as “Garveyites.”

**LANGSTON HUGHES**
A poet, activist, playwright, columnist, from Joplin, Missouri. He lived in several midwestern towns growing up and spent significant time in Cleveland where he graduated high school. He believed in using art as a way to communicate the beauty in the fullness of what it meant to be Black.
THE COTTON CLUB
Harlem’s best-known and most expensive nightclub. It featured Black entertainers, including stars like Duke Ellington and Josephine Baker, but originally served white audiences only.

HAMILTON LODGE
The origin of today’s ballroom scene began at Harlem’s Hamilton Lodge Ball in 1896. Located in the Rockland Palace on the corner of 155th street and Frederick Douglas Avenue, it was the site of extravagant drag balls, where both men and women cross-dressed. The Hamilton Lodge Ball became the most popular yearly event for the LGBTQ community attracting up to 8,000 people in 1937.

HARLEM HOSPITAL
Located on Lenox Avenue between 136th and 137th street. It was 1919 before Black doctors and nurses were added to the staff of this hospital, which served the primarily Black neighborhood of Harlem. In August 1919, Louis T. Wright became the first black doctor to join the Harlem Hospital staff. By 1930, Black doctors comprised forty percent of the physicians on staff.

HISTORICAL FICTION
Some of the real places mentioned in this play
“Whenever you write a history play, you’re always talking about now.”

—Emily Mann

In the play the character, Delia, has a dream to open a family planning clinic in Harlem working alongside the real-life Margaret Sanger. We learn that while some people supported this clinic other Black folks were suspicious that Sanger’s work was an attempt by a white woman to destroy the Black family. Sam supports the clinic but wants Delia to understand why many people in Harlem do not. He tells her “It means we still see our best hope in the faces of our children and it’s going to take more than some rich white women playing missionary in Harlem to convince these Negroes otherwise.”

“Women are dying.”

—Delia

“Who gave him the right to vote on my love stories?”

—Guy

Blues for an Alabama Sky features the character of Guy, an out and proud Gay Black man. The play also references a thriving Gay community in New York City during the Harlem Renaissance. Though the Gay community had a large influence on culture and ideals in 1930s Harlem, there were still battles with homophobia: Guy is condemned by another character for his sexual orientation; Gay men are attacked on the street for holding hands in public.

Blues for an Alabama Sky shows us characters struggling to live their lives in a country where racism, sexism, and homophobia are always present. Sadly, these social justice issues are still part of our world today.

What in the play seems like our world today and what feels different?

Do you think we will ever live in a world with no racism, sexism, or homophobia? What would need to happen to create this type of world?
“Guy’s a dreamer. He always was and he always will be.”

—Angel

DREAMS and DREAMERS

In *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, we meet Guy, a costume designer. He has a big, bold dream—to design costumes for the famous singer and dancer Josephine Baker. He has a large picture of her in his apartment for inspiration as he creates dresses that he sends to her in Paris. Throughout the play, Guy imagines what his life will be like when his dream comes true, and he works hard to make this dream a reality. His friend Angel has a different view on dreams saying, “I’m tired of Negro dreams. All they ever do is break your heart.”

- What is your big, bold dream?
- Who helps you believe in your dreams?
- Do you agree with Angel that dreams can “break your heart”? Is it still worth dreaming if the dream might hurt or not come true?
FRIENDSHIP

Angel and Guy are best friends. Guy explains that even though Angel can sometimes be difficult, he will always be her friend because she let him see how beautiful he was as a young, Gay, Black man growing up in the South. She was the first person who helped him know his value.

“Because you let me see how beautiful I was” – Guy

Is there someone in your life who helps you know “how beautiful you are?”

Who in your life do you help realize their value? How do you help them see their beauty?
In *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, we meet Sam, a doctor who works at Harlem Hospital delivering babies. He works hard and he plays equally hard; he loves jazz music, parties and going out with friends. His philosophy of life is “Long life, good health and let the good times roll!”

**What is your philosophy of life? Do you live it now or do you aspire to live this way in the future?**
At the time of the Harlem Renaissance there were two major beliefs of why art should be created and what art should do. Leaders like W.E.B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson of the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) saw artistic expression as a way for African Americans to fight for equality:

“They wanted artists to draw on their cultural heritage and experience, proving the beauty of their race and its critical contribution to American culture as a whole. Artistic success, they believed, would not only foster pride in the African American community, but also prove to white Americans that blacks were their equals. Du Bois hailed the ‘Talented Tenth’ and Alain Locke the ‘New Negro’ as thinking persons whose race had survived war, migration, and prejudice, and aimed to lead the way to future social justice.”

“...believed that they needed to depict the ordinary African American person as an individual, while simultaneously speaking to a unique African American experience, and celebrating life and all it had to offer. They argued against depicting only ‘cultured’ and ‘high class’ African Americans who mirrored the standards of white society. These young artists advocated art for art’s sake.”

Leaders like Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes did not believe in using art to gain acceptance into white culture. They saw art as a way to explore the fullness of being Human and Black.

What do you think is the power and purpose of art?
New York actor Joe Holt is very excited to return to the stage with real humans in seats for Blues for an Alabama Sky at the Taper. Recent credits include Fred Wilkes on Bel-Air, Dr. Leo Bennett on The Walking Dead: World Beyond, and Jesse Raymond on All American: Homecoming. Regional credits include Love and Information at ACT, 12 Angry Men at Merrimack Repertory, and a pandemic-interrupted The Scarlet Letter at South Coast Repertory. He is forever grateful for his amazing family, his supportive friends, and every positive (and negative!) experience that has provided him with the chance to grow.

(NiJa Okoro) is a graduate of the Juilliard School where she received a merit-based full scholarship. Since graduating, she has gotten to do the National Broadway tour of Jitney directed by Ruben Santiago-Hudson, Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom directed by Phylicia Rashad at the Mark Taper Forum, Two Trains Running at The Matrix directed by Michele Shay, 2017 West Coast Premiere of The Legend of Georgia McBride at the Geffen Playhouse. She has guest starred on 9-1-1: Lone Star, Animal Kingdom, Start Up and can be seen next in the Disney+ feature film Hollywood Stargirl directed by Julia Hart.

(Dennis Pearson is ecstatic to make his Mark Taper Forum debut. Some stage credits include: GOING... GOING... GONE!(The Hudson Theatre), A Christmas Carol (South Coast Repertory), A Soldier’s Play and Julius Caesar (The Studio Theatre), Romeo and Juliet, Dream Girls, Look Away (Long Beach Playhouse). He can be seen on screen starring in Unlocked streaming on Peacock and Tinderbox. Dennis is a graduate of the SCR Acting Conservatory and has studied with Academy Award Winner Tim Robbins and Femi Ogun’s Identity School of Acting, BGB, and Joy Brunson’s The Joy of Acting Studio. dennispearsonacting.com.

Greg Alvarez Reid + Guy Jacobs + Leland Standford +

New York City-based actor most recently appearing in The Bluest Eye at The Huntington Theatre in Boston. He can also be seen in the HBO/ HBO Max film Between The World and Me. His theatre credits consist of Off-Broadway: The Fabulous Miss Marie (New Federal Theatre/Castillo Theatre) Regional: Detour 67 (Signature Theatre), Fences (McCart Theatre Center/Long Wharf Theatre), Return of The Ocean (Hangar Theatre), Seven Guitars (Studio Theatre). He is a proud graduate of Howard University in the newly named Chadwick Boseman College of Fine Arts and attended the British American Dramatic Academy at Oxford.

(He/him/his) is thrilled to be returning to the Mark Taper Forum, fresh off her run in the Tony Award-winning Best Musical, Hadestown on Broadway. Other Broadway credits: My Fair Lady (Lincoln Center), Summer: The Donna Summer Musical. Favorite Off-Broadway/Regional: Motown the Musical (National Tour), Kiss Me, Kate (Pasadena Playhouse), Hair (Hollywood Bowl), Carrie (Los Angeles Theatre), Kim is a SoCal native with a B.A. in Theater Arts from UCLA. Big thanks to her agent, Ryan, at Ideal Talent Agency. For writing scraps, book recommendations and climate change poetry, find her online @heykimsteele.
MEET THE ARTISTS

PEARL CLEAGE
Playwright

(Pearl Cleage) is an Atlanta-based writer who is currently Distinguished Artist in Residence at the Alliance Theatre. She was appointed Atlanta’s first Poet Laureate in 2020, whose plays include Flyin’ West, Blues for an Alabama Sky, and Bourbon at the Border, commissioned and directed by Kenny Leon at The Alliance Theatre. She is also the author of A Song for Coretta, written in 2007 during Cleage’s time as Cosby Professor in Women’s Studies at Spelman College. Her work has earned her many awards and honors, including an NAACP Image Award for fiction in 2008. Pearl Cleage is represented by Ron Gwiazda at A3 Artists Agency in New York City. pearlcleage.net.

PHYLICIA RASHAD
Director

(She/her/hers) directed Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom, Joe Turner’s Come and Gone, Paul Oakley Stovall’s Immediate Family at the Mark Taper Forum and Goodman Theatre, Our Lady of 121st Street at the Signature Theatre, Fences at the Long Wharf Theatre and McCarter Theatre, Lorraine Hansberry’s A Raisin in the Sun at Ebony Repertory Theatre, Kirk Douglas Theatre, and Westport Country Playhouse, August Wilson’s Gem of the Ocean at Seattle Repertory Theatre, and Four Little Girls at the Kennedy Center. As an actress—she has appeared on Broadway, off-Broadway, and on Television in This Is Us, Empire, and The Cosby Show. Theatre credits: Three Sisters, Yellowman, Spring Awakening, Miss Julie, Freedom Summer, Paradise Blue, Cyrano De Bergerac, Macbeth, A Winter’s Tale, Sweeney Todd, Waiting for Godot, Salvage, Ragtime, Scraps, The Mountaintop, Our Town, The Wizard of Oz, WINK, Fool for Love, In the Heights, Happy Ending, American Saga: Gunshot Medley, Jews, Christians and Screwing Stalin, Vol. 1: A Post Racial America, Violet, Her Portmearu, Native Son, etc. 2018 Stage Raw winner – Costume Design, three-time L.A. Ovation Award nominee. 2017 Orange County’s Best Costume Designs, 2015 NAACP Theatre Award winner. Member of Local 768, the Theatrical Wardrobe Union/LA Opera.

WENDELL C. CARMICHAEL
Costume, Wig, and Hair Designer

“I still believe that theatre has a ritual power to call forth the spirits, illuminate the darkness and speak the truth to the people.”

—Pearl Cleage
INTERVIEW WITH COSTUME, WIG, AND HAIR DESIGNER WENDELL C. CARMICHAEL

“What do you do as a costume designer? How do you start?”
“It always starts with the play.”

“What was your journey to becoming a costume designer?”
“You never get too old or too far from your passions.”

“What is the relationship between black people and fashion?”
“...clothes were very, very essential in terms of status”

“What did the Harlem Renaissance mean to fashion, not just black fashion but to the whole world and what is its impact today?”
“The Harlem Renaissance opened us up to the world.”

“How does the neighborhood of Harlem factor into the play?”
“...it gave New York its’ soul.”

“If you were a character in this show, what would your costume be?”
“I’m designing that costume!”

“Is there anything you hope students take with them from seeing this play?”
“...some of them will write a story for 2022.”
REFERENCES


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