

SEATTLE
REP

BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY



BY PEARL
CLEAGE

Youth Guide

Welcome to Seattle Rep!

Despite the Southern reference in the title, Pearl Cleage's *Blues for an Alabama Sky* takes place in Harlem, New York, amid the Harlem Renaissance, an era known for the extraordinary cultural contributions of Black Americans (see p. 2). Like her peer, August Wilson, Cleage has become recognized as a writer of "new classics." From racism to women's health to LGBTQ+ identity and found families, the topics she explores continue to resonate with today's audiences. In the lesson at the end of this Guide, you can think more deeply about the themes you notice in *Blues*.

Harlem has become a special place to me. Every spring, I get to take two local high schoolers to New York City to perform at Harlem's historic Apollo Theater for the National Finals of the Next Narrative Monologue Competition, which features newly created works from fifty of America's leading Black playwrights. We hang out on streets with names like Frederick Douglass Boulevard and Cicely Tyson Way. History—especially Black history—is vibrant all around us. It's an honor to be in a historic place, working on contemporary art, with the artists of tomorrow.

If you'd like to watch the Regional Finals of the Next Narrative Monologue Competition, please join us on Friday, March 14, 2025 right here at Seattle Rep. There we will decide who is headed to Harlem to make *their* artistic mark. For more information on this or any of our youth programs at Seattle Rep, please check out seattlerep.org/youth.



Deanna Martinez
Education & Community
Programs Director

The World of the Play

Set in Harlem in 1930, Pearl Cleage's play *Blues for an Alabama Sky* captures the tension between the aspirations of the Harlem Renaissance—a cultural explosion of Black art, music, and literature in the 1920s and 1930s—and the harsh economic and social realities of the Great Depression. Cleage's characters embody the spirit of the era: Angel, a struggling nightclub singer yearning for stability; Guy, a flamboyant costume designer with dreams of dressing Josephine Baker in Paris; and Leland, a conservative newcomer from Alabama whose views clash with Harlem's progressive ideals.

The Harlem Renaissance's energy is evident in the characters' passion for art and self-expression, yet the play also reflects the movement's limitations, as societal inequalities and personal conflicts undermine their dreams. By intertwining historical context with personal narratives, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* explores

how the Harlem Renaissance inspired creativity and community while highlighting the enduring struggles of race, gender, and class during a transformative era in Black American history.

GET TO KNOW OUR PRESENTING PARTNER:

The Hansberry Project

Named for groundbreaking Black playwright Lorraine Hansberry, The Hansberry Project is a professional Black theater company dedicated to the artistic exploration of African American life, history, and culture. From initial sketches to fully realized productions, The Hansberry Project promotes and supports Black theater artists of diverse interests and disciplines, centering them in the artistic process. Their goal is to create a space where the entire community can be enriched by the voices of professional Black artists, reflecting autonomous concerns, investigations, dreams, and artistic expression. Learn more at hansberryproject.org



The Power of Community

An Excerpt from a Conversation with Director Valerie Curtis-Newton

Seattle Rep: Pearl Cleage's *Blues for an Alabama Sky* premiered in 1995. Why do you think this play resonates so deeply with audiences today?

Valerie Curtis-Newton: What does a play about the 1930s have to tell us today? Cleage has said about *Blues*, "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." I believe this. I also believe that the specific background issues of this play are still relevant. Reproductive rights, LGBTQ+ rights, healthcare equity, and economic opportunity are all impacting our lives today. We need to build stronger communities to thrive. Better more compassionate communities. The questions of how do we get free and what do we do with our freedom remain with us.

SR: What do you hope audiences take away from this show?

VCN: I would like the audience to realize that the folks who lived during the Harlem Renaissance did more than dance and listen to jazz. They lived lives much like our lives, full of choices and consequences. Maybe there is something for us to take away from their experience, like the power of community to hold folks above the rising tide.

SR: You have been instrumental as a mentor and teacher to many young theater makers and emerging artists as the Head of Directing and Professor at the University of Washington School of Drama. What advice do you have for young people about making a life in the theater?

VCN: The journey is different for everyone. Everyone will have their own journey. For me the key lessons are:

1. Cultivate curiosity about many things. Curiosity is the antidote for discomfort.
2. Learn to be resilient. It is a life full of swings and misses. Learn to learn from your mistakes without wilting your passion or your drive.
3. Really listen to the world around you. From history to current events, from strangers to close collaborators, listen for the things that will engage you, speak a truth, and spark your courage.

A Focus on Black Women's Health

In *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Pearl Cleage weaves the systemic health disparities faced by Black women into the lives of her characters, offering a dramatic lens on historical and contemporary issues in American healthcare. These disparities, rooted in structural inequities, resonate through women's health, particularly maternal care, access to treatment, and reproductive autonomy.

Maternal Mortality Crisis

The reality of maternal health inequities parallels the struggles faced by Angel, who, as a Black woman in 1930s Harlem, deals with precarious access to support and stability. Today, Black women are three times more likely to die from pregnancy-related causes than white women, according to the CDC. Historical mistrust of medical institutions echoes in Angel's dependence on community rather than systemic support, highlighting the persistent gap in access and advocacy.

Access to Care and Chronic Conditions

Delia, a social worker advocating for family planning, reflects the challenges of improving health outcomes for Black women in underserved communities. Her work mirrors modern disparities, where untreated chronic conditions like hypertension and diabetes disproportionately affect Black women due to limited access to affordable healthcare.

Reproductive Health Disparities

Delia's push to open a family planning clinic addresses reproductive health inequities, underscoring systemic barriers that persist today. Black women are still less likely to receive comprehensive reproductive care, including contraception, abortions, and fertility treatments, due to geographic, economic, and racial inequities. Delia's struggles embody the tensions between progressive initiatives and societal resistance.

Implicit Bias in Treatment

Cleage's depiction of Black women's resilience underlines the mistrust many feel toward medical providers. The historical context of medical injustices, such as sterilization abuse, informs Angel's wariness of institutional solutions. Today, implicit bias in healthcare continues to erode trust, with Black women's pain and symptoms often dismissed by providers.

Solutions and Advocacy

Blues advocates for community-driven solutions, as seen in Delia's determination and Guy's support system. Similarly, addressing health inequities requires expanding access to care, mandating implicit bias training, and increasing Black representation in medical professions. Strengthening public health policies and fostering partnerships between healthcare systems and Black-led organizations remains vital.

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Sources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Racial and Ethnic Disparities Continue in Pregnancy-Related Deaths." [CDC Online Newsroom](#), 5 Sept. 2019.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. "Disparities in Pregnancy-Related Deaths." *Maternal Mortality Disparities Infographic*, [CDC Archive](#).

Go Beyond the Show



Scan here for our full interview with Valerie and other resources to enhance your experience of *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, including a media list curated by librarians at Seattle Public Library!

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What Do You Know After the Show?

WARM UP In which moments of the show did you feel yourself having some sort of emotional reaction (laughter, sadness, surprise)? What was the reaction and how did the play help create that reaction within you?

LESSON Determining the theme of a play involves identifying the central ideas or messages that the playwright conveys through the narrative, characters, and conflicts. Here's how to approach it:

1. Examine the Context

- Read and notate "The World of the Play" and "A Focus on Black Women's Health" in this Guide.
- Consider the historical, cultural, or social context in which the play was written and set. Understanding the background can reveal underlying themes.

2. Analyze the Characters

Look at the goals, struggles, and development of the characters. Themes often emerge from what characters want, what challenges they face, and how they respond to those challenges.

CHARACTER	GOALS
Angel Allen	
Delia Patterson	
Guy Jacobs	
Sam Thomas	
Leland Cunningham	

3. Focus on Conflict

What conflicts arise in the play? How are they resolved?

4. Reflect on the Ending

The resolution or conclusion of a play often crystallizes its theme. Consider what the playwright leaves the audience with—hope, a warning, or a question. How does the play end?

5. Ask Key Questions

What universal issues or questions does the play explore?

How does the play connect to broader human experiences?

ASSESSMENT

Using your work above, state the **THEME** of *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and justify your thinking.