

# Blues for an Alabama Sky

By Pearl Cleage

Directed by Ron OJ Parson



Archibald J. Motley, Jr.'s *Blues*, 1929, at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City.

## Synopsis

Angel is a struggling blues singer and nightclub performer who just lost her job. Her friend and roommate, Guy, is also out of work as a costume designer, but dreams of being hired to design dresses for the famous African-American singer and dancer Josephine Baker in Paris. Their neighbor Delia, a social worker, is trying to organize a family planning clinic in Harlem. Their friend Sam, a doctor, delivers babies at the Harlem Hospital.

Angel is courted by Leland, a very conservative, religious man from Alabama, who claims he wants to marry her. Meanwhile, Delia, with the help of Sam, is successful in convincing a local church to support a family planning clinic. Guy finally receives the long-awaited notice from Josephine Baker inviting him to Paris to work for her. Angel, however, has gotten pregnant by Leland and obtains an illegal abortion performed by Sam. Furious about the abortion, Leland shoots and kills Sam.

## Setting

The play is set in an apartment building in Harlem, over an eight-week period during the summer of 1930. Guy and Angel share an apartment and Delia lives alone across the hall. The rest of Harlem serves as an invisible setting for the play, as characters regularly reference events and happenings beyond the building's walls.

## Characters

**Angel**, a 34-year-old woman who looks five years younger, former back-up singer at The Cotton Club.

**Guy**, a 30-something costume designer at The Cotton Club.

**Delia**, a 25-year-old social worker on staff at the Margaret Sanger family planning clinic.

**Sam**, a 40-year-old doctor at Harlem Hospital.

**Leland**, a 28-year-old man from Alabama, who has only lived in Harlem for six weeks.

## Off-stage Characters

*These figures do not appear, but they all play key roles in the action of the play.*

### **Josephine Baker (1906-1975)**

American-born dancer, singer, actress, and activist who emigrated to France and was famous for barely-there dresses and alluring dance routines. She assisted the French Resistance during World War II and became an activist in the American Civil Rights Movement, refusing to perform for segregated audiences in the United States and speaking alongside Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. at the March on Washington in 1963. At the time of the play, she was the toast of the Paris nightclub scene.

### **Langston Hughes (1902-1967)**

Poet, columnist, activist, and leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance. At the time of the play, Hughes was 28 years old and very active in the Harlem community. That year, his first novel *Not Without Laughter* was published, earning the Harmon Gold Medal for Literature. Some of his most famous poems are "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and "A Dream Deferred."

### **Richard Bruce Nugent (1906-1987)**

Writer, painter, and famous figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Nugent was one of few gay artists who openly proclaimed his sexual orientation. In the play, the characters refer to him as "Bruce" and attend his party.

### **Adam Clayton Powell, Sr. (1865-1953)**

Founder and pastor of the largest Protestant congregation in the country at the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, with 10,000 members at its peak. He worked to found the National Urban League and numerous historically black colleges and schools.

**Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. (1908-1972)**

Member of the United States Congress, representing the Harlem neighborhood of New York City. He followed his father's footsteps as a pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church and became a vocal advocate for voting, labor, and housing rights for African Americans. At the time of the play, he had recently graduated from college.

**Margaret Sanger (1879-1966)**

Nurse, educator, and family planning activist who opened the first birth control clinic in the United States in 1916. She worked to legalize contraception and founded organizations that eventually became Planned Parenthood.

**Themes and Concepts****Racism**

Guy speaks to being a part of a *demimonde*, meaning that he felt a part of a peripheral or inferior culture. When the play takes place, Jim Crow laws enforcing the segregated legacy of slavery were still in effect in much of the country. However, the Harlem Renaissance marked a rise in racial pride, culture, and art among African Americans, beginning in New York City and spreading across the United States.

**Birth Control/Family Planning**

Delia works in the emerging family planning movement with its founder Margaret Sanger, and Angel has an illegal abortion for an unwanted pregnancy. Abortion was illegal in the United States in 1930, and remained illegal until the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which voided abortion bans based on a woman's right to privacy.

**Homosexuality**

Guy, a gay character in the play, would have been shunned and shamed about his sexual identity in the 1930s. Characters clash directly over his homosexuality. Only very recently have Americans made great advancements towards gay rights, allowing marriage and adoption for gay couples among other achievements.

**Prohibition**

Ratified in 1919, the 18th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution banned the production, importation, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages. It lasted for 13 years, until Franklin D. Roosevelt became president after campaigning to repeal Prohibition, hoping it would help lead to an end of America's economic troubles. The characters in the play are constantly drinking alcohol, even though it was still illegal in 1930.



*Pearl Cleage*

### **About the Playwright**

Pearl Cleage is an acclaimed playwright and novelist, based in Atlanta, Georgia. In addition to *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, she has written many other plays and eight novels and continues to write. Cleage was a speechwriter for the former mayor of Atlanta, Maynard Jackson, and later became his first press secretary.

### **Play History**

The play was commissioned by the Alliance Theatre in 1995. In 1996, the production was remounted as part of the Cultural Olympiad with Atlanta's Centennial Olympic Games. In the 20 years since its premiere, the play has been staged across the country, at Chicago's Goodman Theatre, Hartford Stage Company, Arena Stage in Washington, DC, and the Denver Center Theatre, and now back in Chicago at Court Theatre. *Source: Alliance Theatre*

## Harlem Renaissance Timeline

### 1910

- The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is founded. W.E.B. du Bois becomes editor of their monthly magazine, *Crisis*.  
**Du Bois was an American historian and civil rights activist – he was the first African American to earn a Ph.D from Harvard!**

### 1912

- James Weldon Johnson's novel *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is published.

### 1917

- Marcus Garvey, born in Jamaica, arrives in Harlem and founds the United Negro Improvement Association (UNIA).  
**Marcus Garvey was a political leader and journalist who spear-headed the Black Nationalism and Pan-African movement!**
- Between 10,000-15,000 African-Americans join the Silent Protest Parade, marching down Fifth Avenue.

### 1919

- The "Red Summer of Hate;" race riots break out in Chicago, Washington, D.C. and over twenty other American cities, June to September.
- NAACP conference on lynching, which leads to the publication of *Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918*.
- Meta Warrick Turner creates her famous sculpture *Mary Turner: A Silent Protest Against Mob Violence*, which was her response to the lynching of a black woman in Georgia.

### 1920

- James Weldon Johnson becomes head of the NAACP.
- W.E.B. Du Bois' *Darktower* is published.
- Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* opens at the Provincetown Playhouse in November with black actor, Charles Gilpin, in the lead role.

### 1921

- The Black Swan Phonograph Corporation is founded by Harry Pace; they produce "race records" which helped bring jazz to a larger audience, especially recordings of Mamie and Bessie Smith.
- Langston Hughes' poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" is published in *Crisis*
- The first musical revue written and performed by African-Americans, *Shuffle Along*, by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake opens on May 22 at the David Belasco Theater on Broadway, launching careers of Josephine Baker and Florence Mills.  
**Shuffle Along was recently revived in a successful Broadway run starring Audra McDonald!**
- Marcus Garvey founds the African Orthodox Church in September.

- Founding of the Colored Players Guild of New York.

## 1922

- Marian Anderson (pictured) performs at New York's Town Hall.
- Meta Warrick Fuller's sculpture *Ethiopia Awakening* is shown in the "Making of America" exhibition in New York.
- The Harmon Foundation is established to promote black fine artists.
- The Boston Public Library has an exhibition of African-American visual arts and literature.
- Publication of *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, edited by James Weldon Johnson and Claude McKay.



## 1923

- Willis Richardson's *The Chip Woman* is produced by The National Ethiopian Art Players, becoming the first drama by a black playwright to appear on Broadway.
- Joe "King" Oliver's Creole Jazz Band records with trumpet player Louis Armstrong, they make 37 recordings together.
- Duke Ellington arrives in New York with his band, the Washingtonians.
- Jean Toomer's novel *Cane* is published.
- The Cotton Club, Harlem's largest and most famous cabaret, opens.
- Aaron Douglas arrives in New York; his art style becomes the official one of the Harlem Renaissance.
- Jessie Redmon Fauset's *There is Confusion* is published; this is the first Harlem Renaissance book by a female writer.
- Josephine Baker appears on Broadway in *Chocolate Dandies*.
- Zora Neale Hurston publishes her first short story in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*.



## 1924

- *The Emperor Jones* opens in London, with Paul Robeson in the lead role.
- Miguel Covarrubias' illustrations of black entertainers are featured in *Vanity Fair* magazine.
- Paul Robeson stars in Eugene O'Neill's *All God's Chillun Got Wings*, opening May 15.
- Countee Cullen wins first prize in the Witter Bynner Poetry Competition.
- Marcus Garvey's *Aims and Objects for a Solution of the Negro Problem Outlined* published.
- NAACP leader Walter White's novel *The Fire in the Flint* is published.

## 1925

- The new musical form known as jazz is showcased at Aeolian Hall in New York in the "First American Jazz Concert."

### **Jazz first originated in New Orleans back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century!**

- Survey Graphic publishes an issue entirely about the work of Harlem Renaissance artists and writers.
- White poet Vachel Lindsay reads Langston Hughes poems to an audience at his own poetry reading, and announces Hughes as a bright new talent.
- *The New Negro* anthology introduces the ideas and ideals of the Harlem Renaissance.

### **1926**

- Langston Hughes' *The Weary Blues* is published.
- Controversial novel, *Nigger Heaven*, by white author Carl Van Vechten, is published.
- The Carnegie Corporation buys Arthur Schomburg's collection of African-Americana, becoming the basis for the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.
- The Savoy Ballroom in Harlem opens.

### **1927**

- Duke Ellington begins a three-year stint at The Cotton Club.  
**"A problem is a chance for you to do your best." - Ellington**
- Marcus Garvey returns to Jamaica after being deported.
- *Porgy*, the musical by Dorothy and Du Bose Heyward, opens on Broadway.
- Sculptor Jacob Epstein arrives in New York, and has Paul Robeson sit for a portrait bust.
- *In Abraham's Bosom* by Paul Green, with an all-black cast, wins Pulitzer Prize in May.
- Charlotte Mason becomes a patron of the New Negro, aiding financially, and becomes known as "Godmother" by many young artists and writers of the Harlem Renaissance.
- Countee Cullen publishes three works: *Ballad of the Brown Girl*, *Copper Sun* and *Caroling Dusk*.
- Arthur Fauset publishes *For Freedom: A Biographical Story of the American Negro*.

### **1928**

- Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* is published, becoming the first bestseller by a black author.
- Poet Countee Cullen marries Nina Yolande Du Bois, daughter of W.E.B. Du Bois, on April 9th, in an elaborate celebration described as the social event of the decade.

### **1929**

- Wallace Thurman's play *Harlem* opens on Broadway.
- The Harmon Foundation sponsors an exhibition at the National gallery in Washington, D.C. of black artists' works.

- Claude McKay's *Banjo* is published.
- Broadway premiere of *Ain't Misbehavin'* which features Fats Waller music.
- The Negro Experimental Theater, the Negro Art Theatre, and the National Color Players are all founded.
- The stock market crashes on October 29 – economic crisis known as the Great Depression begins, and brings an end to the 'Jazz Age.'
- A musical short, "Black and Tan," featuring Duke Ellington and his orchestra, is released.

### 1930

- Universal Holy Temple of Tranquility founded; Black Muslims open Islam Temple in Detroit.

### 1931

- Artist Augusta Savage opens the Savage School of Arts and Crafts in Harlem.
- The Scottsboro Trial, a famous trial that involved nine black teenagers in Alabama who were accused of raping two white women on a train.
- James Weldon Johnson's *Black Manhattan*, a history of Harlem, is published.
- Louis Armstrong is featured in the musical short "A Rhapsody in Black and Blue."
- Langston Hughes publishes four works: *Dear Lovely Death*, *The Negro Mother*, *Not Without Laughter* and *Scottsboro Limited*.

### 1932

- Twenty young black intellectuals travel to Russia to make a film, "Black and White," in June.
- Langston Hughes publishes *The Dream Keeper*.

### 1933

- Many Harlem Renaissance writers and artists find employment in a government-sponsored program, the Works Project Administration, designed to create American jobs.
- Dudley Murphy releases a film of "The Emperor Jones" starring Paul Robeson.
- Aaron Douglas created murals for the Harlem YMCA.

### 1934

- Aaron Douglas is commissioned by the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library to create a series of murals entitled Aspects of Negro Life.
- Josephine Baker's first sound film, "Zou Zou" is released in France. (pictured)
- The film "Harlem After Midnight" is released by Oscar Micheaux.
- Zora Neale Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, is published.
- The Apollo Theatre opens.





- W.E.B. Du Bois resigns from *Crisis* and the NAACP.
- Wallace Thurman dies in the charity ward of a New York hospital on December 26<sup>th</sup>.

### 1935

- Harlem Race Riot, March 19<sup>th</sup>, sparked by anger over discrimination by white-owned businesses.
- Miguel Covarrubias illustrated *Mules and Men*, by Zora Neale Hurston.
- African Negro Art exhibition is mounted at The Museum of Modern Art.
- Paul Robeson and Hattie McDaniel appear in James Whales' film "Show Boat."
- *Porgy and Bess* opens on Broadway on October 10<sup>th</sup> with an all-black cast.
- Langston Hughes' *Mulatto*, the first full-length play by a black writer, opens on Broadway on October 25<sup>th</sup>.
- More than fifty percent of Harlem's families are unemployed.

### 1937

- Paul Robeson stars in the film, "King Solomon's Mines."
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston is published.

### 1938

- Jacob Lawrence's first solo exhibition at the Harlem YMCA opens; he finishes his Toussaint L'Ouverture series.
- Mother Horn, a Pentecostal preacher, opens her famous church in Harlem.

## Discussion Questions

1. Did you have strong feelings for any of the characters? Were they positive or negative feelings?
2. What motivated Guy's actions? What motivated Delia's actions? What motivated Angel's actions? Did you feel compassion for these characters? What do you think their lives were like after the play ended?
3. How has society changed since then, \_\_\_\_\_ and how is it still the same?
4. What aspects of race relations clearly place the play in another era, and what moments in the play could easily play out among friends in adjacent apartments in 2017?
5. This play takes place just as the Great Depression begins. What was the Depression? What effect does the economic condition of the country have on each character?
6. What is family planning? Why was the idea of family planning controversial at the time of the play? Why did many leaders of the African-American community oppose it? Is family planning still controversial? If yes, is it controversial for the same reasons?

## Disclaimer for Teachers

This play discusses family planning and abortion, and there is a scene of gun violence.

## **More Resources**

Pearl Cleage: <http://www.pearlcleage.net/>

Harlem Renaissance: <http://www.history.com/topics/black-history/harlem-renaissance>

Prohibition <http://www.history.com/topics/prohibition>

Alliance Theatre:

<http://alliancetheatre.org/sites/default/files/FY15%20Blues%20for%20an%20Alabama%20Sky%20Study%20Guide.pdf>

Denver Center Theatre:

<https://www.denvercenter.org/docs/default-source/Show-Study-Guides/all-study-guides/blues-for-an-alabama-sky.pdf?sfvrsn=2>