



### Summary of key events

- Harlem, 1930s – in the midst of America's Great Depression. Angel, a Black blues singer, loses her job at the Cotton Club, her home, and her boyfriend. She moves to live with her gay friend, Guy Jacobs – a 30-year-old man who dreams of moving to Paris to work for Josephine Baker creating clothes in shows.
- Next door, Delia Patterson, a social worker, is campaigning for a family planning clinic, trying to improve the lives of women in her community. Sam Thomas, a Black doctor, lives with and supports Delia.
- Angel meets Leland Cunningham – a man from Alabama who loves her and wants to marry her. Angel reaches a crossroads in her life: Leland sees it as his second chance for love and stability, but Angel longs to escape, to live freely, and to realise her dreams.
- When faced with pregnancy, Angel's chooses to have an abortion (which was illegal at the time), leading to tragedy: Leland kills Sam, leaving Delia heartbroken.
- Guy realises his dream of moving to Paris and takes Delia with him.
- Angel is left alone, stuck in her difficult life, with no hope or salvation.

### Historical, social and cultural context

- The play is set in Harlem, New York during the 1930s.
- The end of the creative revival period in Harlem.
- The beginning of the period of economic recession (great depression).
- Black people's rights are emerging.
- Women's rights to choose when to have children.
- Contraception / Margaret Sanger clinic.
- 'Back street' abortions / large families.
- Prohibition of alcohol. Entertainment continued in *speakeasies*.

### Characters

The central characters include:

**Angel:** A thirty-four-year-old Black woman. Background singer in a nightclub. Passionate, determined, cunning, selfish, lonely.

**Guy:** A gay man who is about 30 years old. Costume designer. Kind, creative, a good friend.

**Delia:** Social worker. Honest, a good friend, philanthropic. She sees that women need help to manage the impact of poverty on large families.

**Sam:** A doctor who lives with Delia. A benevolent and protective character.

**Leland:** A forty-eight-year-old Black man from Alabama, who comes to Harlem for a period of six weeks. Principled, nostalgic, strong, traditional, short-sighted.

### Original performance conditions

- The play was written by Pearl Cleage.
- *Blues for an Alabama Sky* was originally staged in 1995 in Atlanta, Georgia by *The Alliance Theatre*.
- It was staged again in 1996 at the Cultural Olympiad.
- Originally, it was staged on a proscenium stage with a semi-naturalistic set to capture 1930s Harlem.
- The props and set convey Guy's apartment, his work as a costume designer and his love for Josephine Baker.
- Cleage's goal was to give a voice to poverty, sexuality and the right to choose.
- *Blues for an Alabama Sky* was revived in 2022 by the *National Theatre* in London.

### Structure and themes

- Over the course of a few weeks, the characters come to face difficult decisions, personal losses and changes that shape their future.
- The play is divided into two acts, with five scenes in each.
- These themes are central to the play:
  - Racism: Under the Jim Crow laws, Black people faced systemic discrimination, but culture, pride and hope grew in New York compared to the southern states of the United States.
  - Prohibition: Although illegal, alcohol was still consumed, reflecting rebellion against the law.
  - Sexuality: Being gay was seen as a sin and was illegal at this time, but Guy lives openly and is true to himself.
  - Abortion: Abortion was illegal, which led to many women's deaths as a result of 'back street' abortions'. Delia and Sam fight for women's right to choose when to have children and the use of contraception. Sam, the doctor, aborts Angel's baby, in order to protect her.

### Contemporary audience

- Consider Leland's views on family. He wants to marry and raise the baby as a father. Is this true of our society today? What are your impressions?
- For today's audience, is it possible to identify with the character of Angel? What are today's attitudes and laws in regard to abortion, women's right to choose and methods of contraception?
- Does racial segregation persist in modern society?
- What performances influenced you? Blanche (SCND)?

### Design, performance and directing skills

- **Stage:** Thrust, in the round, proscenium. Why?
- **Set:** Naturalistic, minimalist, symbolic. Why?
- **Costumes/make-up/hair:** Period (1930s), use, style, colour. Why?
- **Lighting:** Strength, focus, lamp location, type. Why?
- **Sound:** Location, strength, impact, soundscape. Why?
- **Characters' voices/posture/gestures/facial expressions.** Why?
- **The relationship** between two characters on stage in terms of proxemics. Why?