

# BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY

BY  
PEARL CLEAGE  
DIRECTED BY  
DR. KRISTYL D. TIFT



# Blues for an Alabama Sky

By Pearl Cleage

Directed by Kristyl D. Tift

Set and Lighting Design by Phillip Franck

Costume Design by Alexandra Sargent Capps

Sound Design by Kristyl D. Tift and Phillip Franck

Technical Direction by Liz Haynes

Scenic Painting by Gary Hoff (Coe Artist in Residence)

Dramaturgy by Olutobi Akisanya, Brianna Stewart,  
and Kristyl D. Tift

## Cast of Characters

Angel Allen ----- Destinee Monét Johnson  
Guy Jacobs----- Elijah Crenshaw-Smith  
Delia Patterson----- Adanna Brown  
Sam Thomas ----- Haneol (John) Lee  
Leland Cunningham----- Christian Rodriguez Rosales

*There will be one fifteen minute intermission*

Please Note: *VUTheatre has a strict policy about no late seating or re-admittance if you leave the auditorium.*

## PLEASE BE ADVISED

There will be a visible gun and the simulation of a gunshot in tonight's performance.

## Crew

Stage Manager-----Katie Chabot  
Assistant Stage Manager ----- Esther Osunlana  
Scene Shop Staff -----Riley Borklund, Lucy Dean,  
Emily Feingold-Fisher, Toby Houghton,  
AB Rhodes, Jonny Wieland,  
and the students from the THTR 1711 class  
Carpenters/Painters -----Kaitlyn Hammond  
Props Manager ----- Natalie Wright  
Costume Design Assistants ----- Rima Day  
Costume Shop Staff:----- Olivia Donofrio, Clara McMillan,  
Calla Reed, Emma Ridge,  
Elizabeth Sanders, Abigail Schultz  
Wardrobe Crew -----Abby Schultz, Jiayi Hou  
Production Electrician----- Ben Damir  
Assistant Electrician ----- Breeann Wallace  
Electricians ----- Trent Griffith, Richard Zhang  
Sound Operator ----- Heidi York  
Run Crew ----- Calvin Kamson and Mimi Ming  
Media Liaison----- Avery Sweet  
House Manager ----- Lia Okenkova

Cameras and recording devices are not allowed in

Neely Auditorium during the performance.

Please turn off cell phones and other electronic devices. As a courtesy to the actors, please do not use devices during the performance.

VUTheatre gladly accepts donations of costumes and furniture pieces.

Call 615/322-2404 to make arrangements.

## Director's Note

In 1995, Pearl Cleage's *Blues for an Alabama Sky* premiered at the Alliance Theater under the direction of Tony Award-winner Kenny Leon and starring Tony Award-winning actress, Phylicia Rashad. Set in 1929, in Harlem, New York—a time and place exploding with African American artistry, intellectualism, culture, and social activism—*Blues* centers on Angel Allen, a thirty-something, former Cotton Club backup singer, who has lost it all in one night. With the help of her Harlemite friends, Guy, Sam, and Delia, as well as Leland—a handsome stranger from Alabama—Angel has the opportunity to rise from a deep depression and create a new life for herself.

Harlem, New York is also a character in the play with its aging, yet sturdy brownstones and the nonstop hustle and bustle of its people. The unique, recognizable aesthetic markers, movers, and shakers of the Harlem Renaissance permeate Cleage's lush dialogue. In *Blues*, she educates as she acknowledges the social, cultural, and political contributions of African American artists, thinkers, and leaders in a way that is careful, challenging, and inspired. In a 2015 interview with Kelundra Smith for *American Theatre*, Cleage said: "Langston Hughes has a two-part autobiography called *The Big Sea*, and it has little chunks about his life and the specific moment of the Renaissance. My mom used to read these stories to us at bedtime. I thought it would be interesting to write a play where this character [Leland] is a fish out of water, arriving in Harlem from Alabama. I wanted him to encounter this group of bohemian artists at a time when the clubs were closing and they weren't working regularly, and see how he deals with this different cultural environment."

Her effort to incorporate the conservative Leland into a progressive Harlem troubles the waters in such a way that the play takes you on a ride, lifts you up, then brings you back down to earth. Her storytelling is at once dramatic, funny, and heartbreaking. A storyteller with an uncanny ability to infuse her plays with a natural balance of comedy and drama, Cleage poses

as many questions in it as she answers. Questions of love, art, fashion, family, sexuality, race, economics, reproductive rights, and friendship collide in this gem of a play...this time capsule.

It has been nothing but a dream to introduce this special play to Vanderbilt University. It took a village, hope, and special care for one another to bring *Blues for an Alabama Sky* to *this* stage at *this* moment. Thank you to the cast, crew, production team, and dramaturgs for making this piece of art with me. *We cannot do this thing called theatre alone.*

Kristyl D. Tift, PhD, MFA

## Dramaturgical Notes

History is a feature in Pearl Cleage's plays. *Flyin' West*, *A Song for Coretta*, *What I Learned in Paris*, and *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, for example, take the history of the African American experience seriously. However, the more modern we become—the more time passes—the less invested in history we can become. History, though, is a teacher. It can inform our present if we are brave enough and curious enough to explore.

Producing a play like *Blues* requires an investment in investigating a time of despair and hope in the United States. The Great Depression and the Harlem Renaissance are happening simultaneously. It is a wonder that the movers and shakers of this movement, such as Langston Hughes, Josephine Baker, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., Zora Neale Hurston, and Richard Bruce Nugent, made an impression at all. But, they did. They left a mark on the United States and abroad that echoes in art, culture, and politics to this day.

Our dramaturgy team—Olutobi Akisanya, Brianna Stewart, and Dr. Tift—had a lot of digging to do to get a grasp on the people, places, and things inherent to the world of this play. And we had more fun excavating, compiling, and synthesizing materials than we thought we would! Our rich discussions and presentations about race, gender, sexuality, religion, medicine, art, politics, social work, and more helped our cast better understand the key players, ideas, and institutions that made Harlem so special in the 1920s and 1930s.

We invite you to engage with our research by scanning the QR code below, or by visiting <https://www.kristyltift.com/blues>. There, you will find our dramaturgical statements along with visual and audio aids that will bring you into the world of the Harlem Renaissance.

Olutobi Akisanya, Brianna Stewart, and Dr. Tift



Scan QR code to visit  
<https://www.kristyltift.com/blues>.

## Biographies

**ADANNA BROWN** (Delia Patterson) is a fourth year student double majoring in Cognitive Science and Child Development. This is Adanna's first show with VUT, but she is no stranger to the stage with credits including roles like Annie in *Annie Jr.*, Celisse in *Godspell*, and The Wizard in *The Wiz*. After coming to Vanderbilt, Adanna discovered her love for student written theatre after being cast in Iceberg Theatre Company's second original musical, *Colorado* written by fellow student Bryce Palmer. Though *Colorado* never saw a formal stage due to the pandemic, Adanna was inspired to write and direct her own original show, *Walking Each Other Home*, for Iceberg's Fall 2021 season. Adanna is beyond excited to return to her acting roots for this poignant piece, and she would especially like to thank Dr. Tift for being the most engaging director she's ever worked with, Dr. Cizmar for first believing in her ability to participate in college level theatre, and her amazing castmates for making an otherwise tough semester full of laughter.

**ELI CRENSHAW-SMITH** (Guy Jacobs) is a sophomore in the College of Arts and Sciences from Brooklyn, NY who's majoring in Sociology and Spanish-Portuguese. He is very excited to be making his VUT debut in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, though outside of Vanderbilt some of his past credits include *Fun Home* and *Hair*. He'd like to thank his moms for coming all the way down here just for this, as well as the cast, crew, and production team for their endless talent and hard work.

## Biographies

**DESTINEE MONÉT JOHNSON** (Angel Allen) is from Waycross, GA and is a Vanderbilt alumna. She graduated in May 2021 from the College of Arts & Science with a major in Neuroscience. She previously appeared in VUT's 2020 Virtual Scene Showcase as Naomi in Adanna Brown's *Walking Each Other Home*, but this is her first full length show with VUT! Outside of Vanderbilt, Destinee is heavily involved in the growing TV/Film community in Nashville. Some of her favorite roles she has portrayed lately include, Lola in the short films *Jane*, *Kimmy in Songbird*, and Giselle in the limited series *Giselle*. She also loves exploring her passion as a writer and has won writing competitions for her short films *Eternal Shadow* and *This is Forever*. Destinee is beyond grateful for the trust and support from her family and friends and would like to thank Dr. Tift for giving her this opportunity to return and do her first stage performance at Vanderbilt University!

**HANEOL (JOHN) LEE** (Sam Thomas) is a freshman in Peabody College double majoring in Human Organizational Development and Cinema and Media Studies. He's from Olympia, Washington and some of his favorite moments in VUT was being part of the *Plays from the Pandemic* last year and he is beyond excited to be part of another show!

**CHRISTIAN RODRIGUEZ ROSALES** (Leland Cunningham) is a sophomore in the School of Engineering majoring in Engineering Science. He is originally from Washington D.C. . This is the first theater production he has ever had the pleasure of being a part of. He would like to thank the crew, production team, and especially cast and Dr. Tift for taking a chance and believing in him. None of this would have been possible without their dedication and heartfelt support.



## Biographies

**TOBI AKISANYA** (co-Dramaturg) is a sophomore student majoring in Human and Organizational Development and Theater with a minor in Cinema and Media Arts. Even though this is her first time serving as a dramaturg, Tobi has been performing for over 10 years but fell in love with theater during the start of her High School career. Some of her beloved non-Vanderbilt roles include Nurse in *Romeo in Juliet*, Donkey in *Shrek: the Musical*, and Nibs in *Peter Pan*. Tobi looks forward to participating in more VUT shows in the future.

**KATIE CHABOT** (Stage Manager) is a senior in Peabody College double-majoring in Elementary Education and Child Studies, with a minor in Theatre. She is originally from Los Angeles, California. This is her first show stage managing for VUT, and she would like to thank the cast, crew, production team, and especially Dr. Tift for their support and belief in her. Katie has also worked as a stage manager for Vanderbilt Off-Broadway's productions of *Dogfight* and *Spring Awakening*.

**ESTHER OSUNLANA** (Assistant Stage Manager) is a fourth-year student majoring in Cinema and Media Arts and Minor in Theatre. She is Nigerian-American and was raised in the great sunshine state of Florida. Esther has performed in 2 VUT productions. In Fall 2021, she was in *Lovelaces*, written by Amina McIntyre. This spring, she performed as Pontious Pilate in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, written by Stephen Adly Guirguis.

## Biographies

**BRIANNA STEWART** (co-Dramaturg) is a junior in The College of Arts and Sciences double majoring in Theatre and Political Science and hails from Indianapolis, Indiana. She recently appeared in VOB's *Lizzie: the Musical* as Bridget Sullivan and VUT's *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (Mother Teresa/Gloria). Some of her favorite roles have outside of Vanderbilt included Muzzy Van H. in *Thoroughly Modern Millie* and Juror No. 10 in *Twelve Angry Jurors*. She is so excited to share all of this dramaturgical work with everyone. And she wants to thank Dr. Tift for the opportunity to delve into dramaturgical work for the first time! She sends her congratulations to the cast and crew on a fantastic show!



#### FACULTY & STAFF

Ibby Cizmar	Assistant Professor
Christin Essin	Associate Professor
Phillip Franck	Professor & Department Chair
Liz Haynes	Associate Professor of the Practice
Krista Knight	Writer in Residence
Leah Lowe	Associate Professor
Alexandra Sargent Capps	Assistant Professor of the Practice
Kristyl D. Tift	Assistant Professor
Emily Stewart	Administrative Specialist

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