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### Brilliant Performances

Montgomery Advertiser - Montgomery, Ala.

Subjects: Singers; Entrepreneurs

Author: Swafford, Allan

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#### Document Text

ASF stars shine in 'Alabama Sky'

The Harlem renaissance, one of the more interesting periods in the history of black Americans, occurred in the late 1920s and early '30s. It produced many of the geniuses of jazz, very important literary figures and some remarkable artists. This milieu is the setting for Pearl Cleage's notable play "Blues for an Alabama Sky."

But it is the setting only -- not the subject. Cleage explores the magnetic pull of this intellectual and artistic environment on some of its fringe characters, particularly the good and bad effects it has on her characters' life in Harlem.

Who are these characters? Angel and Guy have come to Harlem from Georgia pursuing stage careers, she as a singer, he as a costume designer. Once a prostitute, Angel has risen to the level of kept woman and very minor nightclub singer. The flamboyantly gay Guy has some tenuous connection with Josephine Baker, the black American singer who became the toast of Paris. It is a connection we dismiss as a dream until -- quite suddenly at the play's end -- Baker sends for him to design her gowns.

Delia, an intense young social reformer, lives a life of high seriousness in an upstairs apartment and falls in love with Sam, a doctor nearly twice her age and with antithetical values. She is busily working with Margaret Sanger to establish a family planning clinic while Sam's motto is "Let the good times roll."

Into this volatile mix comes the very traditional Leland from Alabama. He could not be more out of place. Promptly he falls in love with Angel. The play's conflict is between the religious and cultural values represented by Leland and those values (or their absence) represented by the others.

Beginning in dominantly comic mode the play moves quietly and inevitably to tragedy for every one but Guy who is rescued by the dea ex machina of his dreams, Josephine Baker.

Chuck Smith powerfully directs this exceptionally strong cast. A deeply felt lyricism informs his approach.

Marsha Estell's Angel is flashily glamorous and compellingly vulnerable in her sad final scenes. Delia, played by LaFern Watkins in a sweetly melancholy portrayal, engages all our sympathies. Council Cargle imbues his Dr. Sam with enormous warmth. While the play is rich with humorous moments, Dexter Zollicoffer's campy Guy provides most of it as well as great strength and pathos. As Leland, the play's most difficult role, Morocco Omari gives a complex and gratifying performance.

#### WANT TO GO?

What: "Blues for An Alabama Sky" by Pearl Cleage, produced by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival

When: Runs through Feb. 18 with performances at 2 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Sunday, 7:30 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and 8 p.m. Friday; no performance Feb. 14

Where: Alabama Shakespeare Festival in the Blount Cultural Park

Cost: Tickets range from \$20-\$30

Information: 271-5353

Allan Swafford has reviewed local theater for more than 15 years. You can contact him by writing Allan Swafford, c/o the Montgomery Advertiser, 200 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL 36104 or by faxing (334) 261-1548.

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#### Abstract (Document Summary)

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