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We all know there is a crisis of communication in our world. It manifests in so many ways: people turning in on themselves; the avoidance of opinions or even facts that contradict our position; the replacement of discussion by abuse. None of these things need be so. They have only happened because certain people have worked out that rage is more profitable than joy. Shame on us for letting them get away with it.

To watch a good play is to be reminded of the wonder of good words beautifully spoken. It may well be a wish-fulfilment fantasy - none of us really speaks as well as this in real life - but why not have something to aspire to? Not all of us can stand or move as gracefully as the people up on stage, either: but that doesn't stop us admiring them - and wishing we could have some of that presence ourselves. If only there were a way to learn how to communicate with such clarity and grace...

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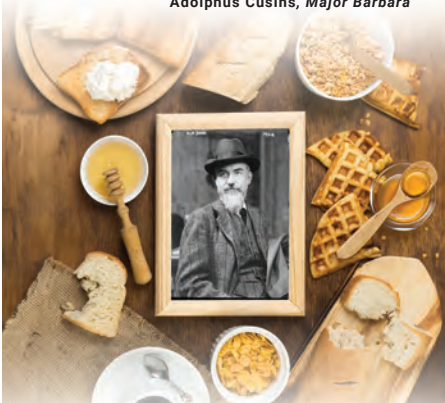


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"When the finger of Destiny suddenly points at a man in the middle of his breakfast, it makes him thoughtful."

Adolphus Cusins, Major Barbara



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The Secret Garden workshop participants. Photo by Peter Andrew Luszyk.

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For 35 years, my husband Scott and I have understood what this Festival means to this town: theatre IS community. My grandchildren are the future of this community and the reason The Shaw has my enduring support.

- Ruth Aspinall, Governors Council and Doherty-Rand Legacy Circle Member

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BLUES FOR AN ALABAMA SKY

by Pearl Cleage

with MARY ANTONINI, JJ GERBER,
VIRGILIA GRIFFITH, ALLAN LOUIS,
and STEWART ADAM MCKENSY

Directed by KIMBERLEY RAMPERSAD

Sets and costumes designed by CHRISTINE TING-HUAN URQUHART

Lighting designed by CHRIS MALKOWSKI

Original music and sound designed by MIQUELON RODRIGUEZ

Commissioned by and World Premiered at ALLIANCE THEATRE COMPANY, Atlanta, Georgia
Kenny Leon, Artistic Director; Edith Love, Managing Director

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Front cover: illustration design by Key Gordon.

"I wanted more music -
more happiness - more life.
I wanted some comrade who
felt as I did. I felt exalted."
Bernard Shaw, *Fanny's First Play*



Virgilia Griffith
as Angel Allen

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THE CAST *In Alphabetical Order*

Delia Patterson	MARY ANTONINI
Leland Cunningham	JJ GERBER
Angel Allen	VIRGILIA GRIFFITH
Sam Thomas	ALLAN LOUIS
Guy Jacobs	STEWART ADAM McKENSY

Setting: Summer 1930 An apartment building in Harlem, New York

Act 1

<i>Scene 1</i>	<i>3 AM Sunday morning</i>
<i>Scene 2</i>	<i>Sunday, late afternoon</i>
<i>Scene 3</i>	<i>Wednesday, late afternoon</i>
<i>Scene 4</i>	<i>Sunday evening</i>
<i>Scene 5</i>	<i>Friday evening</i>

Intermission

Act 2

<i>Scene 1</i>	<i>Two weeks later, Sunday afternoon</i>
<i>Scene 2</i>	<i>Two weeks later</i>
<i>Scene 3</i>	<i>The next day</i>
<i>Scene 4</i>	<i>The next day</i>
<i>Scene 5</i>	<i>Two weeks later</i>

Stage Manager	DORA TOMASSI
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Props Coordinator	ALEXA MACKENZIE
Voice and Dialect Coach	JEFFREY SIMLETT

SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Jamie Anderson, Samantha Felsbourg, Georgia Holland,
Dr William Rodriguez & Joyce Rodriguez

UNDERSTUDIES

CELESTE CATENA*, Delia Patterson; JJ GERBER, Guy Jacobs;
DIETER LISCHÉ-PARKES, Leland Cunningham; STEWART ADAM McKENSY, Sam Thomas;
KIERA SANGSTER, Angel Allen; JANE VANSTONE OSBORN, Stage Manager;
MICHAEL DUGGAN, Assistant Stage Manager

* RBC Emerging Artists are generously supported by the RBC Foundation

Running time is approximately 2 hours and 47 minutes including one intermission



Stewart Adam McKensy as Guy Jacobs

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

by Kimberley Rampersad

Pearl Cleage, like Bernard Shaw or James Baldwin is a polymath, whose playwrighting is birthed from, and informed by, their politics, activism, and other writings including essays, novels and poetry. Her play, *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, is a masterful composition of *The New Woman* and *The New Negro*: two ideas borne out of movements happening simultaneously on either side of "the pond" at the time of this play - the Fabian Society and the Harlem Renaissance, respectively.

The dreams possessed by these four friends are keeping them alive amidst the desperate conditions of the Great Depression. At the heart of their dream lies the seed of Creation, and if they possess the imagination and courage to pursue them, they may realize Self-Actualization. They must compose their own lives. These friends, Angel, Guy, Delia and Sam, live as if a jazz quartet. When they attempt to integrate a newcomer to Harlem, Leland, his politics creates discord rather than transforming the group into a quintet.

Cleage illuminates the pressure under which the five live and work and love, as their dreams propel them. The racism, sexism, homophobia and systemic poverty is certainly compounded by the oppressive heat of a Harlem summer in 1930. And she articulates the breadth of politics and opinions within the Black communities - the descants, counterpoint and dissonance - by weaving notable historical persons and institutions throughout the piece. Isabel Washington, Margaret Sanger, Langston Hughes, Bruce Nugent, Marcus Garvey, Adam Clayton Powell Sr and Jr, the Harlem Hospital, Abyssinian Baptist Church, and the Cotton Club held strong and, many times, opposing views from one another.

Blues for an Alabama Sky is in the tradition of many great modern American plays which attempt to reveal the heights and depths of our humanness in the everyday existence of everyday people.

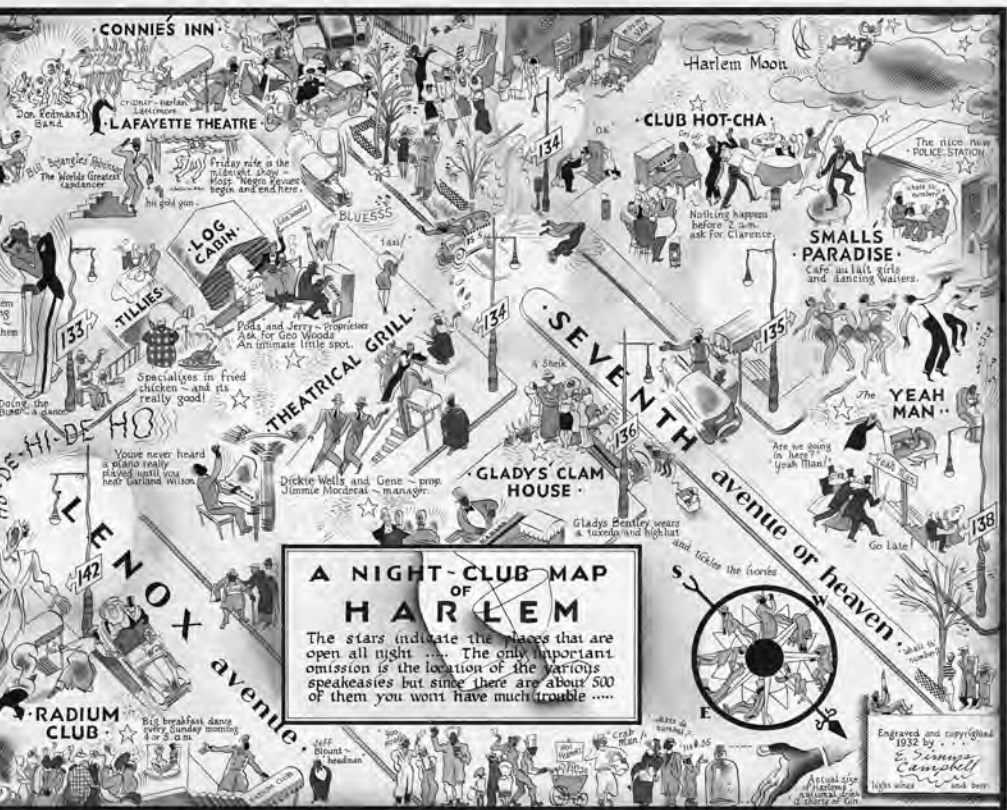


In literature and the visual arts, aspects of the Harlem Renaissance transpired by design, orchestrated by a cohort of professorial editors who saw literary production as a means to greater respect and political gains for Black Americans. But this programmatic approach provoked aesthetic debates and the divides that emerged were partly generational, having to do with social mores and perceptions of propriety. Such dubious morality was rejected by Langston Hughes and many of the younger generation. Hughes, who celebrated his third book and his 28th birthday in 1930, wanted to shine a light on Black life in all its forms, and he railed against the prudes who felt these portraits of the "low down" risked the respect of those in power.

Hughes and other artists took inspiration from Harlem's music and nightclub scene, which also brought white patrons in droves. They were lured uptown in part by the looser enforcement of Prohibition, the infamous 13-year period in which the sale and trafficking of alcoholic beverages was outlawed throughout the United States. A number of Harlem's clubs catered specifically - the Cotton Club exclusively - to whites, and many segregated their clientele. White patrons also emerged as an essential source of income for writers and artists, who depended on this financial support, but all too commonly struggled against their benefactors' racist prejudices and expectations.

Harlem nightlife allowed queer sexualities to be lived more out in the open, at least after hours. Hamilton Lodge hosted its renowned drag balls, and Gladys Bentley donned a tuxedo and top hat and flirted with female patrons from the piano at the Clam House, a gay speakeasy. But Harlem was not free from harassment and policing. As much as the cabarets have been

A Night Club Map of Harlem. Illustration (1932) by E. Simms Campbell (1906-1971).
 Courtesy Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University Library





A lithograph entitled "Plastered" from "Harlem: As Seen by Hirschfeld" (1941) © Al Hirschfeld Foundation www.AlHirschfeldFoundation.org.

celebrated, they were then decried by moral purists as sites of social deviance. Many figures from the period are now understood by biographers and historians to have been queer, but few were out in the way that term is used today. One exception was Bruce Nugent, a charismatic writer and visual artist who walked on to a bit part in the era's hottest touring play, *Porgy*, and hosted parties at an apartment christened with an unprintable moniker. (It borrowed a portmanteau of literati and a racial slur, coined by the era's queen of cheek, Zora Neale Hurston.)

The label "Harlem Renaissance" has itself been a subject of endless debate among commentators, perhaps most of all because any label obscures the tremendous range and diversity – aesthetic, generic, geographic and political – of cultural endeavour that travelled under this umbrella. Remembered

for its exuberance, the era's mood was a strategic response to conditions of widespread suffering: racial discrimination and violence, economic and sexual exploitation, for Black women most of all. A regular Harlemit might decide to have a party when they were short on rent and sell food and bathtub gin to raise money. These fabled house rent parties should be remembered for their ingenuity and the desperation that provoked it, as much as for their gaiety. Rents were high, wages – when there were any – were low, and evictions loomed large.

When did the renaissance end? The Wall Street crash of 1929 and the onset of the Depression dampened the interest of publishers, and the end of Prohibition in 1933 closed some speakeasies, but some of the greatest works associated with the era, such as Hurston's masterpiece *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, were published in the 1930s, and Cab Calloway only assumed the baton for his legendary run at the Cotton Club (taking over for Duke Ellington) in 1931. Still, by 1940, many commentators were looking at the previous decades with a decidedly retrospective view. Langston Hughes would write in his autobiography *The Big Sea*, published that year, of a time "when the Negro was in vogue." But in many respects the popularity and popular influence of Black culture in the United States persisted from this time – while often going unrecognised or being baldly appropriated. Meanwhile, a new generation of Black American writers and artists defined themselves in relation to what had gone before. Subsequent movements – by Black Americans and other groups throughout the world – have consistently looked back to those decades in Harlem for inspiration and attempted to recapture the era's intricacies (while often rejecting portions found less savoury). Commentators, stylists, documentarians and creators have found this era boundlessly fascinating, perhaps because nothing can fully explain its magic.

© Melissa Barton, September 2022

Melissa Barton is Curator of Drama and Prose for the Yale Collection of American Literature, which includes the James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection of African American Arts and Letters, at Beinecke Library, Yale University. This essay originally appeared in the programme for the National Theatre production of Blues for an Alabama Sky in 2022.



Mary Antonini as Delia Patterson

JJ Gerber as Leland Cunningham,
Allan Louis as Sam Thomas and
Mary Antonini as Delia Patterson



JJ Gerber as Leland Cunningham



Allan Louis as Sam Thomas



Virgilia Griffith as Angel Allen

PRODUCTION HISTORY



Blues for an Alabama Sky was commissioned by Atlanta's Alliance Theatre and was given its world premiere there in 1995 under the direction of Kenny Leon and starring Phylicia Rashad. It made its long-anticipated New York debut with the Keen Company in 2020, and other recent productions have been seen at Chicago's Court Theatre (2017), Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum (2022), New Jersey's McCarter Theatre, Massachusetts' Barrington Stage Company and Minneapolis' Guthrie Theatre (all in 2023). In 2025, it has been produced by both Seattle Rep and Trinty Rep in Providence, RI. After receiving its UK premiere in a 2017 student production at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* opened to great acclaim at the National Theatre's Lyttelton Theatre in London in 2022, starring Samira Wiley and Giles Terera. This Shaw Festival production marks its first appearance on a Canadian stage.



Top: Lamar Jefferson as Guy Jacobs and Brittany Bellizeare as Delia Patterson in *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (Guthrie Theater, 2023). Photo by Dan Norman courtesy Guthrie Theater. Bottom: Ronke Adékoluejo as Delia Patterson in *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (National Theatre, 2022). Photo by Marc Brenner courtesy Royal National Theatre.

THE AUTHOR

PEARL CLEAGE (born 1948) is an Atlanta-based writer whose plays include *Pointing at the Moon*, *What I Learned in Paris*, *Flyin' West*, *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Bourbon at the Border*, commissioned and directed by Kenny Leon at the Alliance Theatre. She is also the author of *A Song for Coretta*, written in 2007 during Cleage's time as Cosby Professor in Women's Studies at Spelman College. Her play, *The Nacirema Society Requests the Honor of Your Presence at a Celebration of Their First One Hundred Years*, was commissioned by the Alabama Shakespeare Festival and premiered in 2010, in a joint production by the ASF and Atlanta's Alliance Theatre, directed by Susan Booth. Her plays have also been performed at Arena Stage, Hartford Stage, the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, the Huntington Theatre, the Alabama Shakespeare Festival, the Long Wharf Theatre, Just Us Theatre, True Colors Theatre, Bushfire Theatre, the Intiman Theatre, St. Louis Black Repertory Company and Seven Stages. She is also an accomplished performance artist, often working in collaboration with her husband, writer Zaron W. Burnett, Jr.

They have performed at the National Black Arts Festival, the National Black Theatre Festival and colleges and universities across the country. Cleage and Burnett also collaborated with performance artists Idris Ackamoor and Rhodessa Jones on the script for *The Love Project*, which premiered at the National Black Theatre Festival in 2008, and is currently touring the country. Cleage is also an accomplished novelist.

Her novels include *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, a *New York Times* bestseller and an Oprah Book Club selection, *I Wish I Had a Red Dress*, *Some Things I Never Thought I'd Do*, *Babylon Sisters*, *Baby Brother's Blues*, *Seen It All and Done the Rest* and *Till You Hear from Me*. She is also the author of *Mad at Miles: A Blackwoman's Guide to Truth*, a groundbreaking work of race and gender, and "We Speak Your Names," a praise poem commissioned by Oprah Winfrey for her 2005 celebration of legendary African American women and written in collaboration with Zaron Burnett.

Cleage has also written for magazines, including *Essence*, *Vibe*, *Rap Pages* and *Ms.* In addition to her work as the founding editor of *Catalyst* magazine, a literary journal, she was a regular columnist for the *Atlanta Tribune* for 10 years, winning many awards for her thought-provoking columns. She has also written for TheDefendersOnLine.com. Cleage has been awarded grants in support of her work from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Fulton County Arts Council, the Georgia Council on the Arts, the Atlanta Bureau of Cultural Affairs and the Coca-Cola Foundation. Her work has earned her many awards and honours, including an NAACP Image Award for fiction in 2008. Pearl Cleage is represented by Ron Gwiabda at Abrams Artists Agency in New York City. She also maintains a Facebook fan page.



BIOGRAPHIES

Please scan for
full biographical
information!



KIMBERLEY RAMPERSAD

DIRECTOR

SHAW 2025: Director of *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Ella and Louis*, Director and Choreographer for *Anything Goes*; 10th season. In grade 3 my music teacher Ms. McRorie cast me as Goldilocks in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. In middle school Mr. Olafson's art room became my de facto home room. In high school, Mr. Zalis taught me about life through music. The River East School Division in Winnipeg, Manitoba gave me one of the best arts educations anyone could ever have. Along with my dance teacher, Mrs. Daurie and my choir master, Mr. Greig, these adults were surrogate parents, who nurtured the artist in me and have led to this place. I could never thank them enough for what they have given me.



CHRISTINE TING-HUAN URQUHART SET & COSTUME DESIGNER

SHAW 2025: Set and Costume Designer *Blues for an Alabama Sky*; 2nd season. Costume Designer for *The Orphan of Chao*, Shaw 2024. Ting is a Taiwanese-British designer and collaborator whose work questions narrative structures and viewpoints through a visually driven interrogation, the body as politics, and getting audiences out of black box mentality to be witnesses to a different kind of event. Her training is in product design and as a sculptor painter, with a continued interest in the intersections between live performance, film and gaming. You will have last seen her work as set and costume designer at Tarragon for *Craze* and at Young People's Theatre for *Wicked Nix*.



CHRIS MALKOWSKI

LIGHTING DESIGNER

SHAW 2025: Lighting Designer for *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. I was born and raised in East York, Toronto, and have been grateful to be exposed to such a wide spectrum of cultures and entertainment from a young age. My earliest memory of seeing a show was a production of *The Importance of Being Earnest* at Soulepper while I was in high school. As a child, I always loved directing homemade films with the kids in my neighbourhood, and in high school drama classes I became fascinated with the ability to tell stories with lighting design. I was very fortunate to be an assistant lighting designer at the Shaw Festival, working on over a dozen productions - my favourites being *Middletown* and *Mythos*.



MIQUELON RODRIGUEZ

COMPOSER & SOUND DESIGNER

SHAW 2025: Composer and Sound Designer for *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. I was born in T'karonto, where I currently live as a settler under the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. (You should definitely look it up.) And though I've made most of my career through sound and music, I wanted to be in the performing arts from the moment I first watched *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* on TV as a kid. Improvisation has always been key to how I create as an artist because of this, regardless of medium. That openness to roll with whatever comes my way has carried me through all of my concurrent theatre journeys, including artistic leadership, where I've had the incredible luck of training directly under artists such as Nina Lee Aquino and Philip Akin. I strive to pass along that knowledge and experience to artists like me starting their journeys.

MARY ANTONINI

SHAW 2025: *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Anything Goes*; 2nd season. I grew up all over Canada: from Winnipeg and Vancouver to Regina and Toronto. My life has been rather nomadic. It means that the stage and the studio (and my mum) have always been where I can find a sense of true belonging. I am delighted, thrilled, and thankful to be home.

**DELIA PATTERSON****JJ GERBER**

SHAW 2025: *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Wait Until Dark*; 4th season. Theatre has always been a thrill to me. The escape into the unknown. The excitement, the curiosity of what might come next. That feeling when suspension of disbelief shifts reality into something surreal and each word takes on new meaning. Love, hope, desire, fear. The audience joins in the delicate dance from cocoon-like seats, waiting to become something more. Whether it's joyous, trepidatious or enlightened, the play is the catalyst. And the performers join in. Sharing humanity with all in the space. In a world that holds the dichotomy of being both more connected and less connected than ever, thank you for taking the time to share in theatre.

**LELAND CUNNINGHAM****VIRGILIA GRIFFITH**

SHAW 2025: *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Murder-on-the-Lake*; 1st season. It was a weeknight. I was young and it was dark. I remember the city lights. I can't remember the sounds. I am walking with my Auntie. We are walking across the street. We are jaywalking across the street. Running out of time. My feet are trying to keep up. The white line on the street as we jaywalk. I was never allowed to jaywalk. The show begins. The lights come up. I see a black woman with locks on the stage. I hear the sounds of water flowing in the background. The chorus of ancestors. The dirt. I am in awe. This was the beginning of my journey. *The Adventures of a Black Girl in Search of God* by Djanet Sears.

**ANGEL ALLEN****ALLAN LOUIS**

SHAW 2025: *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Anything Goes*; 7th season. I was born in Cap-Haïtien, Haiti. I immigrated to America with my mom. Naturally, most immigrant parents want their children to become doctors or lawyers, but in grade nine I made my theatrical debut on a green skateboard in the musical *Runaways* by Elizabeth Swados. At the time, my mom didn't think much of my artistic pursuits and was not in the audience to see me get a standing ovation. However, the elation I felt in that instant set me on my path to prove her wrong!

**SAM THOMAS**

**STEWART ADAM MCKENSY**

SHAW 2025: *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Anything Goes*; 5th season. I am originally from Richmond Hill, Ontario and my love for theatre started in my pre-teens when I started singing in my youth church choir. It was my first time performing, and I watched the audience as we took them on this spiritual, theatrical journey. At that time my high school did not have an arts program due to cuts, so I spent most of my time after school performing with my local community theatre groups. A highlight at Shaw was getting to play Tommy Albright in *Brigadoon* 2023 and memorable shows like *Trouble in Tahiti* and *Me and My Girl*.

GUY JACOBS**DORA TOMASSI**

SHAW 2025: Stage Manager for *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Murder-on-the-Lake*; 24th season. As a little girl growing up in Toronto, theatre companies would perform at my school. I loved it so much that I would beg my teacher to let my friends and me put on a play we had "made up" during recess. I knew from a young age that I wanted to work in the world of make-believe. Now I'm thrilled to share my work with my children. Seeing their reactions is priceless. My first show working at Shaw was *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. *Floyd Collins* and *When the Rain Stops Falling* are still my two favourites.

STAGE MANAGER**KELLY BOUDREAU**

SHAW 2025: Assistant Stage Manager for *Blues for an Alabama Sky* and *Wait Until Dark*; 2nd season. Growing up in Erin, Ontario, I spent a lot of my childhood watching musicals and plays on TV. It wasn't until high school that I discovered stage management was a career path. This path has led me to study and work in theatres across Canada, England and Wales. I'm fortunate that my job allows me to travel and experience different countries all while getting to do a job that I love. I'm grateful this journey has now led me to beautiful Niagara-on-the-Lake and the Shaw Festival.

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER

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production



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