



RENT PARTY

Written by Amina Henry / Directed by Gretchen Van Lente / Designed by GVL and Taylor Harrison

THE HISTORY...

Rent Party focuses on the lives and struggles of the people living in Harlem during the Harlem Renaissance (1920s NYC). In the early 1900s African-Americans migrated north in large numbers. It was called the **Great Migration**. Most flocked to the neighborhood of Harlem, despite the fact that this influx of African-Americans in a once White neighborhood drove housing prices up. At one time it was estimated that up to seven thousand African-Americans lived on one block. This meant people were living on top of each other in small apartments and rooms. There was high demand for space, and more competition for work. Rent parties became popular in the 1920s as a way for families and tenants to raise enough money to pay the rent. They would hire musicians, get cheap refreshments and charge a small entry fee. These parties were a beacon of light – where hard-working folks could let off some steam, socialize, and listen to great up-and-coming musicians, maybe even a young **Louis Armstrong**. It is a pivotal and fascinating moment in the history of African-Americans in this country and we believe people of all ages should know these stories, hear these words, and listen to this music.

THE PLAY...

In the play *Rent Party* Tulip and Mae are single mothers living together in a small apartment in Harlem. Their children: Rose, Jenny and Ricky must help them put on a rent party so that they do not get kicked out of their house. The children are in charge of getting ice (not an easy task in the early 1900s, as it came in huge blocks), handing out the rent party cards to ensure enough people show up but without the police finding out (this was a big deal because the adults at this party expected alcohol which was illegal during the 1920s thanks to **prohibition**), and something else really important...

THE PUPPETRY...

The main style of puppetry used in this piece is called toy theater, a model of a block in Harlem. Toy theater is usually 2-dimensional and utilizes small figures. The poet **Langston Hughes** amassed a large collection of “rent party cards” and these are collaged to create bricks on one of the buildings, along with **Duke Ellington** sheet music, and other beautiful papers. The toy theater puppets will be a combination of found historic images and photographs of our actors. Also, lights will illuminate shadow puppetry scenes in the windows – some inspired by the artwork of Harlem Renaissance-era painter **Aaron Douglas**. A third form of puppetry used is what’s called hand and rod puppetry. A black cat named Langston spits poetry on the street corner that speaks to the times.

* Terms in **BOLD** represent important figures and terms that might enjoy further study/research...

For more on Drama of Works: www.dramaofworks.com

RENT PARTY SLANG SCAVENGER HUNT

As with any time period, there were particular slang terms used. What do you think these mean? How many can you catch the characters saying in the play? Was your definition correct?

- You slay me: _____
- Big cheese: _____
- The berries: _____
- The rent man: _____
- A clam: _____
- Bee's knees: _____
- Jake!: _____
- Dumb Dora: _____
- Silly tomato: _____
- Hot dog!: _____
- Cat's meow: _____
- Applesauce: _____
- Hoof it: _____
- Wiggle and unwind: _____
- Negative Nelly: _____
- Close it!: _____
- A bean: _____
- 'Lil bit: _____
- Razzing: _____