



Photo by Danny Sanchez.

A NOTE FROM THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR JOHN DIAS

Harlem

By Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up
like a raisin in the sun?

[Or fester like a sore—
And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?
Or crust and sugar over—
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?]

In 1951 Langston Hughes wrote about the American Dream as it applied—or not—to his African-American brothers and sisters in Harlem. Inspired by his poem, Lorraine Hansberry sat down to write this play about her actual brothers and sister who, with their parents, had the audacity to dream of an America where they could live in a neighborhood of their own choosing. (For a brief history of the actual events—and the policies and practices at play—see the panels our dramaturg, Anika Chapin, has displayed in the lobby.)

If, like me, you're feeling a little duped and made not just a little angry by the slow progress and historical pendulum swings on our national "arc of justice," you might feel better (or something) to consider, as I finally am—that the "American Dream" isn't really a dream at all. In fact, it is really just a promise. I don't mean to minimize it by saying *just* a promise. If anything, I mean to minimize the notion of its being a dream at all. I've always chafed at the anodyne notion of that concept. There's never been anything *dreamy* about our national aspiration to prove our founders right: we hold this truth to be self-evident that all men are created equal. When we prove this—if we prove this—it's the result of struggle and determination and grit and luck and a truthful yet hard confrontation with aspects of ourselves

that aren't always beautiful or "dreamy." That every day we must honorably strive and suffer setbacks as we right the wrongs of injustice and the temptations of our own selfishness. To be American is to have made that promise. And a promise is a contract that one human makes with another. And when you make that contract you bind yourself to that other person. And if that bond is true and enduring you've created something as profound as a family. A family that expands into a nation.

I'm reminded of some lyrics Sarah Schlesinger wrote for *The Ballad of Little Jo*—another story of our complicated history that upends any "dreamy" notions of where we're headed. At the end of the story, the townsfolk, assessing the damage they've caused, propose a way forward: "Today is the day we make a new beginning.... A promise made, a promise kept, unbroken through the years."

Watching events unfold in places like Charlottesville and hearing the conversations folks are having about the symbols from our past, I hold some hope that we will confront the realities of our shared history and stop pretending we're pursuing a dream and get to work on the promise, together. So I was excited to read a glowing review of a new book soon to be published by the Oxford University Press in their series: "The Oxford History of the United States." Apparently, Richard White in his forthcoming *The Republic for Which It Stands: The United States During Reconstruction and the Gilded Age, 1865-1896* makes a go at upending some of the dreamy myths we have about ourselves. Although there's some encouragement too.

If, like me, you're any kind of "grammar geek" you'll be interested to learn that Reconstruction was when we threw out the rules of subject-verb agreement and gave up saying (correctly) "The United States *are*" in order to express ourselves as one single body, one family: "The United States *is*." (Frankly, I'll also never stop wondering how in New Jersey, two rivers can take a singular form. But that's a puzzle for another day.) For now, let's lean in and get to know the Youngers, Hansberry's fictionalized family of her own. And rejoice in the presence of some of our own theatrical family: off-stage husband and wife (Brandon Dirden and Crystal Dickinson) and dad (Willie Dirden) and our Two River sister, Brenda Pressley (*In This House and Trouble in Mind*). Let's lean in and think about our promise, together.