



# The Dreams That Make Us

By Ina Bochian

Photography Ina Bochian

## A Reflection on Dreams Deferred in Reaction to a Play for Women & Girls at Devonshire Playhouse

"The Dreams That Make Us" is a compelling performance celebrating the aspirations and experiences of women and girls written, directed and performed by Orthodox Jewish women. Starting the review in the middle echoes the play's non-linear storytelling and thematic depth, similar to the second scene's structure. The play, rich in original drama, dance, and song, showcases the diverse dreams of its all-female cast, highlighting the universal truth that aspirations, when deferred or suppressed, carry significant emotional weight. This duality becomes particularly poignant when connected to Langston Hughes's poem "Harlem," also known as "A Dream Deferred," which questions the fate of dreams left unfulfilled. This classic poem came as soon as the play opened with a violin solo.

# Harlem

## A Dream Deferred

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?**

The production's high caliber, worthy of prestigious venues like Steppenwolf Theatre or Broadway, challenges stereotypes and emphasizes the power of voice and artistry as means of expression and community connection. Ultimately, "The Dreams That Make Us" offers a powerful commentary on the universal human experience, inviting reflection on the aspirations that shape our identities across cultures. Therefore, each component of the collective performance could be envisioned as a multicultural collaboration because the themes transcend culture and ethnicity, but the beauty and significance of a full female cast and crew amplifies the power of collective female voices. Every woman with a dream has a choice between deferring her dream to appease those in her life or fighting for the dream while losing some people along the way, or dealing with the consequences of disappointing loved ones through non conformity.



“Harlem,” originally published in 1951 by Langston Hughes as part of his collection Montage of a Dream Deferred is one of 91 interconnected poems designed to be read as a cohesive long poem. This structure mirrors the format of the play “The Dreams That Make Us,” which features a series of extensive monologues that collectively convey a rich tapestry of experiences and aspirations. Both works explore themes of deferred dreams, using their unique formats to enhance the emotional depth of the narratives and to highlight the significance of each voice within a larger context. The similarity in structure emphasizes how individual stories contribute to a broader commentary on hope, longing, and the quest for identity.

The first scene of the play captivated me with the striking performance by Emma Barel, whose monologue about her loved interest reminded me of someone I care about. The way the story refers back to the piercing eyes of the guy who catches the character’s attention drew me in. The more she talked about those eyes, the more I saw the eyes of someone significant and specific in my mind. We sometimes meet people who make such an impact, even if we take a detour to spin the block once again. Understanding ourselves and our initial instincts about those who make a grand entrance can be a complex journey. Life's twists and turns can obscure clarity, yet they often lead us to realizations that what is meant to be inevitably falls into place. This interplay of fate and familiarity reminds us that meaningful encounters, no matter how brief, can deeply shape our perception of ourselves and our relationships.



Mother & Daughter Arielle Turover Cohen & Netallie Cohen

Photo Credit: Ina Bochian

However, it was Jessica Morgan's entrance that added a provocative twist. With her humor and sarcasm, she described her mother’s dreams for her life as “simple” yet ambitiously ordinary, which resonated deeply with me. This contrast stirred a mix of emotions, leaving me with a pit in my stomach, akin to a festering, inexplicable wound. Morgan's performance highlighted the tension between societal expectations and personal aspirations, capturing the heart-wrenching complexity of striving for acceptance while grappling with the weight of those seemingly modest yet profound dreams.

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Jessica's reflections on the dreams imposed upon her by her mother resonated deeply with me, stirring my own regrets about not fully understanding my mother's aspirations for my life. I couldn't help but feel that my dreams, too, had been curtailed in some way. As I sat next to a lovely South African woman who mentioned her son, hinting at a potential connection, I recognized a universal truth: all mothers yearn for their children to find stability, companionship, and care, much like my own mother desires for me. This shared longing for fulfillment across generations and cultures underscores a powerful bond among mothers and their children, illuminating the complex interplay between personal dreams and familial expectations.

Respectfully, I showed her a photo of the man with the piercing eyes—someone who had truly captivated me. Her immediate response was, “Well, he looks like a Greek God. I can’t blame you. Even I love him just from the picture. His bone structure is impeccable.” I couldn’t help but agree, laughing as I replied, “There lies the trouble; I’m either at a loss for words or I end up saying too much.” In a nurturing tone, she advised, “Oh dear, just let him win. It’s better that way.”

Internally, however, I mused, “I’m feeling like I’m taking a lot more losses than I’d like in life, and a few more wouldn’t change much if winning at love means softening up and missing the ball.” This reflection underscored my struggle with vulnerability, revealing a tension between the desire to embrace connection and the fear of potential heartache. It was a poignant reminder that love often requires navigating a delicate balance between openness and self-protection.

Almost audibly hearing my own thoughts clashing with the ongoing monologue on stage felt like a tennis ball struck with force rather than precision. I found myself transported to my mother’s living room, just as I had been the week before. Beneath the humor of the actress’s performance, there was a palpable sense of the pain that accompanies expectations. Parents who are too lax may inadvertently raise children who become careless adults lacking boundaries. In contrast, overly strict parents can instill such fear in their children that they impose limits on their own abilities to dream in vivid colors.



Actress & Author Arielle Turover Cohen

Photo Credit: Ina Bochian

Creating parameters around dreams can stifle imagination, much like trying to play a professional sport without adhering to the rules of the game. Without a framework, it becomes impossible to achieve anything meaningful; wandering aimlessly leads only to confusion and frustration. This insight struck me deeply, highlighting the delicate balance between structure and freedom in the pursuit of our aspirations, emphasizing that both support and boundaries are crucial for nurturing our dreams.

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As the play progressed, it offered various perspectives on dreams through a rich tapestry of drama, dance, and songs, performed as solos or duets, each capable of resonating on its own. Much like Langston Hughes's collection of poems, each segment of the play could be appreciated independently. However, when viewed together as a cohesive collection, the impact of the overarching message intensified, enriched by the interplay of diverse genres. This multi-faceted approach allowed for a deeper exploration of aspirations, revealing the complexities and nuances of each character's journey while harmonizing their individual stories into a unified narrative. The combination of distinct artistic expressions not only elevated the emotional resonance but also underscored the idea that dreams—though personal—are interconnected in meaningful ways.



Enchanted by the proficiency of all the women performing on stage, I found myself envisioning an off-Broadway performance in New York, where such talent could easily shine. Yet, here I was in Skokie, seated at the Devonshire among an audience composed almost entirely of Orthodox or modern Orthodox Jewish women, all modestly dressed in long skirts and long sleeves. The sense of community was palpable, and in that moment, I caught myself wishing, “I wish I had worn a skirt.” This thought highlighted not only my admiration for the performers, but also my desire to connect more fully with the cultural and communal spirit surrounding me, making me acutely aware of the unique atmosphere we all shared in that intimate space.

I almost always wear a skirt to Jewish events, even when it's not required, but that evening, I unknowingly opted for leather shorts paired with patterned stockings, giving me the appearance of a cabaret dancer—a fact gently noted by the South African woman sitting next to me. This little detail brought back memories of my own mother, who emphasized modest dress during my upbringing and continues to do so today. Yet, despite my unconventional outfit, no one in the audience seemed to mind whether I wore pants or not. The woman's comment was meant as a compliment; she admired my fashion sense, which she conveyed in her charming South African accent. She shared that she had once been a social worker back in South Africa, another detail that reminded me of my mother, who is a nurse. This connection rooted me further in the moment, highlighting the interplay between personal identity and cultural expectations, and reinforcing the bond shared among women navigating their aspirations while embracing their unique paths.



Ina Bochian & Arielle Turover Cohen

Photo Credit: Stacey Hunt

As I tuned in and out of the play, different aspects of the performances stirred memories of my childhood—moments of foolish choices made in an effort to feel “normal,” all while trying to remain true to myself, often failing at both. Just as this thought crossed my mind, one of the actresses posed a question that struck a chord: “What do you do when the beat drops?” This question echoed several times throughout the performance, accompanied by a poignant visual as the performers descended to the ground, slumped over in a powerful representation of defeat and surrender—an image that felt universally relatable.

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I found myself slumping in my chair, distracted by a text from a girlfriend who is also a playwright. The desire to join her after the performance to unpack everything was strong; I yearned for a conversation that would allow us to reflect on the myriad themes of struggle and resilience that the play illuminated. This urge to connect further emphasized the shared experience of grappling with dreams and identity, making the performance not just an artistic endeavor but a personal journey for everyone in the audience.

I desperately needed a hug, yet I didn't know anyone in the audience well enough to allow myself to unravel publicly. As I turned my attention back to the play, I heard the actress on stage say something along the lines of, "When the beat drops and you fall, you get back up." At that moment, the strong voice of my beautifully fierce friend, Carmilla K—a remarkable Native American and Black fitness instructor and aspiring literature professor—echoed in my mind. She often says, "Fall down seven times, get up eight." Her words resonated with me, triggered by the actress's message, prompting me to press my back against the chair and straighten my posture.

In that instant, I felt a surge of resilience rekindle within me. The intertwining of their messages served as a poignant reminder of strength and perseverance, encouraging me to embrace my challenges rather than shy away from them. It was a small but significant shift, reinforcing the idea that even in moments of vulnerability, I carry the support of strong women in my life, inspiring me to rise again.



Watching the performance drew me in and out of various states of consciousness, triggering memories of significant people in my life—most of whom I hold dear. I didn't just see reflections of myself in the performances; I also recognized the extraordinary women who have shaped my journey, depicted by the talented actresses on stage. Each character seemed to embody traits and stories reminiscent of these influential figures, creating a rich tapestry of personal connections.

Through their performances, I was reminded of the strength, resilience, and complexity of the women in my life, each of whom has left an indelible mark on my heart. The interplay of these memories with the live artistry created a profound experience, allowing me to celebrate not only my own narrative but also those of the remarkable women who continue to inspire me every day.

Once the play was over, I sought out Arielle Turover Cohen, a children's book author I had met at the Purim Book Fair hosted by the Chicago Jewish Alliance a few weeks prior. Our initial connection had blossomed over my fine art design of "Ariel the Jewish Bear," which was initially inspired by Ralph Lauren's Bear and someone with that middle name whose presence gives me a sense of safety, much like a teddy bear gives a child, but also challenges me enough to develop courage, much like the little bear in Arielle's book.



Ina Bochian at Northbrook Public Library Silent Protest

Photo Credit: Ina Bochian

While still deciding on a name, my dad also casually mentioned that Ariel is a powerful name, meaning "Lion of God." Furthermore, Ariel from Disney's "Little Mermaid," had a profound impact on me growing up because she was depicted as beautiful with red hair, while I was ridiculed and bullied for mine. By the time I got to high school, all I heard from the kids in my Romanian (non Jewish) community, especially the boys, was how ugly my hair and nose are, which were the most prominently "Jewish" features. The hateful remarks deeply impacted my sense of self worth and ideal of beauty, but once I found myself among other Jewish people I saw myself in them and them in me, making me feel beautiful. In turn, I find Jewish people among some of the most beautiful.

**“ESSENTIALLY, MY LITTLE ARIEL BROUGHT ME TO THE PLAY. HE HELPS ME MAKE FRIENDS AND FEEL APPRECIATED, WHICH IS WHY I CARRY HIM EVERYWHERE NOW, AS A PATCH ON MY JACKET, A PRINT ON A BAG, OR EVEN A STICKER IN MY POCKET, OR ON A NOTEBOOK. ARIEL IS MORE OR LESS MY GOOD LUCK CHARM.”**

Connecting with Arielle and meeting her daughter and mother after the performance was deeply meaningful for me. It helped pull me out of my comfort zone and placed me among women who exude kindness and possess beautiful spirits. Their warmth and welcoming presence enhanced the experience of the performance, making it even more impactful. This interaction not only fostered a sense of community but also reminded me of the strength and support found in female relationships. Sharing this moment with them enriched my understanding of the play's themes and highlighted the beauty of connection, reinforcing the idea that we are all interwoven in our journeys, each contributing to the narratives of one another's lives.

When she asked me to attend the performance, her message included gratitude for a bag I had given her with “Ariel the Jewish Bear” in exchange for her book about the courageous boy and his bear. Essentially, my little Ariel brought me to the play. He helps me make friends and feel appreciated, which is why I carry him everywhere now, as a patch on my jacket, a print on a bag, or even a sticker in my pocket, or on a notebook. Ariel is more or less my good luck charm.

After the show, I went to a speakeasy called Kashmir, where I was supposed to meet my playwright friend and the host of the party; however, I didn't see either of them. My playwright friend changed her mind about coming out, and I couldn't locate my other friend in the crowded venue—he must have been caught up entertaining. Instead, I ran into Nick C, a friend I had recently made on the set of a music video for another local artist, Taylor Bennett, who noticed the little Ariel on my jacket. It's remarkable what a bit of creativity and self-confidence can accomplish, even when we feel like our dreams have been cut short. Once we shift our mindset to letting go of childhood dreams or aspirations that we've placed on the back burner, we can genuinely thrive—even on days when it feels like we're in the midst of a nightmare.



For the past six months or so, it feels like every day is the same nightmare, repeating itself in different ways. I feel stuck in a maze, living some version of a different hell over and over again. Just when it seems like something good is about to happen, it slips through my fingers or the colors fade away. I find myself in a gray space, devoid of color, where I started, telling myself the same tired story that you can only go up when you're down. But I'm exhausted from running uphill on a slippery, icy slope only to fall flat on my back, ending up at the bottom of that same forsaken hill. While I lay there figuratively, I experience small moments of gratitude, reminded by a mentor of mine, Dr. Eric Thomas, who says, "If you're gonna fall down, fall on your back, because if you fall on your back, you can look up, and if you can look up, you can get up."

This idea connects to a moment in the play when the actress posed the question: "What do you do when the beat drops?" She answered, "When the beat drops, you get up." However, sometimes it takes too much energy to get back up, only to find yourself running around in circles and spinning the block. Lately, this sentiment feels particularly relevant; my current state feels like I'm caught in this cycle while also trying to watch my back. When our energy is low and we have our backs turned, those who wish to bring us down tend to take their shots.



Ina Bochian & Nick C. at Kashmir

Photo Credit: Nico

By the time I ran into Nick, I was elated that he understood exactly how I felt without me having to explicate everything. Happy to see me, he embraced me and said with a smile, "Aww, you're wearing my favorite little bear jacket." It seems Ariel managed to make someone smile. He truly is a happy and lucky bear, bringing joy to those whose spirits are heavy. It is indeed possible to feel both grief and joy simultaneously; these emotions are not mutually exclusive. Happiness, however, is elusive and somewhat temporary, which is why the pursuit of happiness remains just that—a pursuit.



"I HAD THE WORLD IN MY HANDS AND LET IT SLIP FROM ME.  
YOU WERE CONTROLLING OUR PATH LIKE IT WAS DESTINY.  
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*"Sincerely"*  
*Kami*

To address the larger question posed by Langston Hughes in "Harlem," I believe that what happens to a dream deferred is that it ignites our determination to keep pursuing that dream. We fall seven times and get up eight, as Carmilla K. inspires her students to do. We rise after the beat drops, ready to write a new song, filling the silence of despair with the crescendo of an upbeat that encourages us to dance. Fortunately the rest of the night at Kashmir ended on a high note as we danced the night away.

For about an hour, I felt on the edge of happiness, but not quite there yet—still in pursuit, considering that all the dreams that truly matter to me have been deferred. On the way home, my favorite song, "Sincerely," by another Chicago artist, Kami, came up on my playlist. The lyrics resonate deeply with the phase of life I'm currently navigating, inspiring me to channel uncomfortable circumstances into a source of creative fuel. The first few lines capture this sentiment perfectly: "I had the world in my hands and let it slip from me. You were controlling our path like it was destiny. Strings pull like symphonies try to make me dance to your beat because mentally I felt out of tune, but still make songs from melodies..."

Kami was the first person I saw when I arrived in the city that night and the last person I said goodbye to before leaving with Nick and our other friends. When I first got there, I shared a bit about the play, and he asked what it was called. "I can't remember exactly," I admitted. "You don't remember the name of the play?" he responded, sounding a bit surprised. Embarrassed, I explained, "Not really. I only found out about it a couple of hours before I went because someone involved asked me to come."

Kami understood. "It was kind of heavy. I just came out to decompress. I wasn't ready for everything it triggered," I added. It was comforting to see a familiar face in a fellow artist who may have wrestled with some of the same emotions I was experiencing, especially considering that the lyrics to his song articulated some of the feelings I struggled to convey in that moment.

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Reflecting on the night as a whole helped bring me back to the pursuit of dreams deferred along with a conversation I had with Nick about our mutual dreams. "We met for a reason," he said. "The little bear brought us together for a reason and I know we will do great things in the future." As it turns out Little Ariel managed to connect me to an author with the same name, get me to go to a play written and produced by Orthodox Jewish women, while also resonating with a black man who shares some of my dreams.

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In a sense, "the dreams that make us" serve as roadmaps to connecting with our "neshamah", or soul. While we dream in our sleep to connect with our inner selves, we can also experience a dream-like state while awake, as we embark on a quest to satisfy our longings. The Hebrew word "shem", meaning "name," contains the central letters of the word "neshamah", which means "soul." This etymological connection teaches us that our names are intricately intertwined with our essence, providing a window into our true selves.

Somehow, this experience has revealed that Ariel, the little bear, must have a soul and dreams of his own, despite emerging from my imagination. Although he is named after a real person, he seems to have taken on a life of his own, propelling the narrative forward and connecting me with individuals who inspire my creativity. Perhaps Ariel is my spirit animal, embodying the part of me that lies exhausted in my back after having fallen down for the hundredth time. Maybe the little bear allows that tired part of me to look up at the sky and count the stars, all while he joyfully seeks out the right people to bring into my life, helping me rise again and pursue my deferred dreams. This little Jewish bear, whose name means "Lion of G-D," has been leading me lately, guiding me to see beyond the physical realm and encouraging me to place my future in the hands of the Creator of all dreams.

As I walked to the car, I noticed another literal sign attached to a yellow piece of metal on a light pole. A sticker proclaimed, "Prevail & Prosper," and I took it as a sign of guidance for my journey ahead. To commemorate the moment, I hung my bag, adorned with "Ariel the Jewish Bear," on the sign and captured a photograph. The light hit just right in the dark alley by the parking lot. Perhaps, in time, the nightmare would come to an end, and I would once again be able to dream in vivid color.



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