



**Lights Up! Library
Classroom Activities**

Jaja's African Hair Braiding

By Jocelyn Bioh

Directed by Whitney White



INTRODUCTION

Thank you for bringing Manhattan Theatre Club's Lights Up! Library initiative into your high school classroom! We're thrilled to provide to you and your students these classroom activities and the performing recording of *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* by Jocelyn Bioh.

Our goals for this initiative are:

- To help students better understand themselves and the world through the medium of theatre
- To help develop a knowledgeable, perceptive new audience for the theatre and for the arts in general
- To stimulate participants' imaginations, creativity, and critical thinking skills through engagement with challenging theatre works

The activities are divided into three sections:

- **Preparing Students to View the Play** — activities may include classroom discussion prompts, writing prompts, and theatre games or improvisations
- **Viewing the Play** — including questions for classroom discussion after students watch the performance
- **Follow-Up Activities** — further activities intended to deepen students' personal and intellectual interactions with the play

Additionally, [click here](#) to access supplemental resources which may include links to articles and videos meant to bring further context to this experience.

Our hope is that you will have the time to activate all of the activities in this document; however, we understand that time is among the scarcest resources in a high school classroom. One could maintain a rich experience by engaging in the framing questions, one preparatory activity, post-show questions, and one follow-up exercise. And, of course, please modify these activities — or devise your own — in any way necessary to meet the needs of each student in your classroom.

Some of the activities you'll find on these pages align to the [National Core Arts Standards for Theatre](#), and most will align to your local benchmarks and standards.

We hope that this experience will be enriching and educationally beneficial to your students!



ABOUT MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

Over the past five decades, Manhattan Theatre Club has been a preeminent producer of the highest quality, award-winning theatrical productions of new works by American and international playwrights. Our over 600 premieres have been produced throughout the country and across the globe and have contributed a proud legacy to the American theatrical canon.

Our artistic mission, which Artistic Director Lynne Meadow created and has implemented since 1972, is to develop and present new work in a dynamic, supportive, environment; to identify and collaborate with the most promising new as well as seasoned, accomplished artists; and to produce a diverse repertoire of innovative, entertaining, and thought-provoking plays and musicals by American and international playwrights in our theatres each season. Our commitment to excellence extends to every aspect of the company: from the gifted permanent staff; to a supportive Board of Directors; to a first-rate Education program, which has served more than 100,000 students of all ages in New York City, across the country, and around the world; to a quality, paid career training program, which prepares the next generation of theatre professionals for jobs at MTC and beyond; to a robust behind-the-scenes developmental program for new work. MTC performs in multiple venues: our Broadway home at the 650-seat Samuel J. Friedman Theatre—formerly Biltmore Theatre—which we restored and reopened in 2003, and at New York City Center off-Broadway, where we created a 300-seat Stage I and a 150-seat Stage II.

MTC productions have earned 7 Pulitzer Prizes, 30 Tony Awards, 51 Drama Desk Awards, and 49 Obie Awards, amongst many other honors, but our success is not measured by awards. Instead, the merit of our work is represented by the output and talent of the myriad of writers and artists who have debuted at MTC and who continue to return for multiple productions. We are proud of the artists whom we have discovered and nurtured, as well as their impact on our industry.

ABOUT THE PRODUCTION

Manhattan Theatre Club's world premiere production of Jocelyn Bioh's *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* opened on October 3, 2023, at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre. It was directed by Whitney White. The cast included Brittany Adebumola, Maechi Aharanwa, Rachel Christopher, Kalyne Coleman, Somi Kakoma, Lakisha May, Nana Mensah, Michael Oloyede, Dominique Thorne, and Zenzi Williams. The set was designed by David Zinn; costumes were by Dede Ayite; lighting design was by Jiyoun Chang; original music and sound design were by Justin Ellington; video design was by Stefania Bulbarella; hair and wig design was by Nikiya Mathis.

NOTE FROM JOCELYN BIOH ABOUT JAJA'S AFRICAN HAIR BRAIDING

For most of my life, truly since I was 4 years old, I have been wearing my hair in braids. I have had braids for so long, I can actually name the 3 times in my life when I did NOT have braids or some type of extensions for a significant amount of time. Once in my senior year of high school, once in college and the longest was for the year I starred in my first and only Broadway show (when I auditioned for the play, I was broke and couldn't afford to get braids. Once I booked the show, I couldn't change my hair. Go figure, I actually HAD the money then, oh well.) But that's it. Any other time in my life, I've had braids. So I have spent a very large portion of my life in hair braiding shops and can tell you all about them. The stuffy ones that have way too many braiders in too small of a room. The shop that only has one hair braider because she likes her peace of mind. The shop that is located behind another place of business (a barber shop, a bodega, a pharmacy, a fish market - I've seen it all.) And I've met and seen women from all walks of life who either work at the shop or come there in search of a new look and better lease on life. I've gone to 125th street without making an appointment and taken my chance with the kind hair braiding lady standing on the corner, in the cold, flagging down any customer she could find. And always with the standard sales pitch: "hair braiding miss?" I'm always arrested by the relief on their faces when someone responds "yes, I'd like to get my hair braided;" I imagine, that at least for the next few hours they don't have to put their dignity aside by begging random strangers asking if they can provide a service for them. Each and every person who enters the shop has a story. This play is for them. I celebrate you amazing women and thank you for what you do. To many people, you are just "hair braiding ladies" - random African women people pass by on the street, but to me, you are heroes, craftswomen and artists - with beautiful, gifted and skilled hands.

Dedicated to all of my favorite hair braiding ladies: Auntie Maggie, Auntie Cassandra, my sister Jackie, Ali Berry, the sisters - Salimatou and Jaja, Sira in LA, and my current miracle worker - Nafi. Thank you for saving my life and my hair.

And to all the dreamers and my dear best friend, Tolu - I love you beyond words.

CHARACTERS, SETTING, AND TIME

NOTE All characters are of Black American and/or West African Descent and are to be played by Black actors. Thank you.*

JAJA - 40's+; Senegalese; Owner of the shop. The backbone and/or saving grace of everyone in the shop. Getting married today in City Hall to Steven - the landlord of a local building.

MARIE - 18; Jaja's daughter who runs the shop for her mother; has a lot of weight on her young shoulders because of her circumstances.

BEA (pronounced BEE) - 30's; Ghanaian; has been at the shop the longest; the town gossip with an unpredictable attitude - she seems addicted to causing drama.

MIRIAM - mid to late 20's; Sierra Leonean; quiet and kind on the surface but has a fierce spirit underneath her shell.

AMINATA - 30's; Senegalese; She loves her job but never wants to work; she's Bea's sidekick in gossip and drama.

NDIDI (pronounced IN-Dee-Dee) - late 20's/early 30's; Nigerian; the young spitfire; She dresses the youngest and braids the fastest. Everyone at the shop knows that she makes the most money and that doesn't always go over well with everyone - namely Bea.

JENNIFER - 20's; Black American; wants to get micro braids. Is in the shop all day, incredibly patient.

VANESSA/SHEILA/RADIA (played by the same actor):

VANESSA: 30's; super rude customer that no one wants to deal with.

SHEILA: The friendly but loud talking businesswoman. She enjoys a little gossip like the next person.

RADIA (pronounced like Nadia): 18ish; one of Marie's former classmates.

MICHELLE/CHRISSEY/LANIECE (played by the same actor):

MICHELLE: The nervous client who doesn't want trouble and just wants to get her hair done peacefully.

CHRISSEY: 30's; really wants braids that will "make her look like "Beyonce"

LANIECE: 30's; a really messy eater, likes to have a good time.



JAMES/FRANKLIN, THE SOCK MAN/ OLU, THE JEWELRY MAN/ ERIC, THE DVD MAN (played by the same actor):

JAMES: 30's; Ghanaian; Aminata's on again, off again husband who clearly takes advantage of her; Nigerian

FRANKLIN, THE SOCK MAN - 30's; honest man just trying to make a living; Black American

OLU, THE JEWELRY MAN: 30's; another honest man just trying to make a living; has a bit of a crush on Ndidi; Nigerian

ERIC, THE DVD MAN: 30's; the caring DVD man who looks out for his friends; Senegalese

SETTING:

A hair braiding shop in Harlem (likely off of 125th Street)

TIME:

Very recent past (let's say 2019 for now)

PREPARING STUDENTS TO VIEW THE PLAY

FRAMING QUESTIONS

Either through classroom discussion or individual journaling, ask students to reflect upon these questions:

- Where are you from, literally and figuratively? How do origins shape our identity?
- What are your dreams and aspirations? What might stand in the way of realizing them?

WRITING ACTIVITY: "I AM FROM" POEM

Jaja's African Hair Braiding is a play about immigrants. The hair braiders in Jaja's shop, including Jaja herself and her daughter, Marie, come from different West African countries. Each woman has a unique story, set of traditions, and personality. At the same time, they all share a skill (braiding) and a determination to realize their respective dreams. Finally, they are all part of an adopted "family," looking out for one another and for the well-being of the shop.

To introduce this idea of diversity, disparity, and commonality in your classroom, ask each student to write an "I am from" poem.

This is a "fill in the blanks" list poem, each line of which begins with the phrase, "I am from..." followed by a phrase that completes the thought literally, figuratively, or metaphorically. The poems can be as long as the students like, but encourage them to come up with at least ten lines.

The first line might well identify a country of origin or street address:

"I am from *Port-au-Prince, Haiti.*" or "I am from *832 Ocean Avenue, Brooklyn.*"

Next perhaps could be names of parents or caregivers.

Coach students to be both specific and imaginative. Their poems could include names of foods they love, activities they enjoy, values they hold ("I am from *respect for all.*"). Coach them too to invoke sensory images ("I am from *the comforting warmth of a hot shower on an icy winter morning.*").



The idea is to celebrate each student's unique identity.

The final line of each poem should be: "That's where I'm from."

Have students read their poems aloud. Ask them to observe similarities and differences of individuals within the group.

Ultimately, the aim of this activity is to call students' attention to how we are all unique individuals, but that we share in a collective humanity: we all came from somewhere; we all have loved ones; we all cherish values; and so on — like the characters in *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*.

WRITING ACTIVITY: "I AM GOING TO" POEM

This activity complements the "I Am from..." poems. All the characters in *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* have dreams and aspirations. To call your students' attention to this dimension of the play, have them create list poems, each line of which is to begin with "I am going to be..." or "I am going to have..."

Ask students read their poems aloud. Discuss the importance of having dreams, aspirations, and goals and alert the class to be aware of the disparate dreams of the characters in the play.

IMPROVISATION ACTIVITY: "DAY IN THE LIFE (OF A SHOP)"

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Cr1.1-II.c., TH:Cr2-III.b., TH:Cr3.1-I.a., TH:Cr3.1-I.b., TH:Pr4.1-I.b., TH:Pr6.1-I.a., TH:Re7.1-I.a.

Part One — Set the Shop

Assign students into groups of three or four. Ask them to take two minutes to generate a list of workplaces such as a neighborhood business or shop (e.g. deli, cell phone store, laundromat). Then, ask each group to select one of those locations upon which they'll focus.

Next, ask students each to create the character of an employee in that workplace. For each character, students should complete the form on the next page.



“Day in the Life” Character Questions

Employee’s Name: _____

Employee’s Age: _____

Employee’s Family: _____

Where are they from? _____

Job Title: _____

How long have they worked here? _____

What are some of the duties and responsibilities of the job?

What’s rewarding or satisfying about the work?

What’s challenging or frustrating about the work?

What are the sources of tension or conflict while on the job?

What is the employee’s motto or most frequently used phrase?

What are the employee’s most distinctive traits?

Part Two — Activate the Shop

Once each group has created their employees, they become characters. The next step is for the students to physicalize the characters they've created and the shop they work in. First, each group should “cast” their members as one of the characters they've chosen. Have the students walk around the room, embodying their characters' traits and saying aloud the characters' mottos or frequently used phrases.

Now that everyone is warmed up and has a better sense of their character, ask students to use classroom chairs, desks, and tables to create the workplace environment. Have them improvise the start of the day, with each character entering and beginning to go about their respective jobs (turning on a computer, starting the grill, stocking the shelves, etc.). Give the groups a chance to plan and rehearse their scene, in which characters should greet and interact with one another as they enter, finding ways in doing so to make as clear as possible who they are and how they are feeling physically and emotionally.

Groups perform their “day in the life” scenes for the rest of the class. In each presentation, once each character has entered and the work day has been established, stop the scene and ask the audience to report on what they have observed. How would they describe each of the characters? What's distinctive about them? What do we see and infer about the nature of the workplace and its emotional dynamic?

Coach the class to make the same kinds of observations and inferences about the characters in *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* when they see it.

VIEWING THE PLAY

You'll receive a link and password to the performance recording of the play on the first weekday of the month for which you registered to view the play. The recording may be viewed only during regularly scheduled class time in classrooms or assembly spaces on your campus. Viewing credentials may not be shared with students for individual viewing at home or on social media.

You may wish to assign each student to “track” a character during the performance using a [Character Profile Form](#).

CLASS DISCUSSION

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1-1.a., TH:Re8.1-1.c., TH:Re9.1-1.b, TH:Re9.1-1.c.

After viewing the play, use these questions to facilitate a class discussion about the theatergoing experience:

- What moments in the production were particularly vivid and powerful?
- What was surprising?
- What was confusing to you?
- What were the pivotal moments?
- Who of the characters seemed most sympathetic? Why?
- Which characters were less admirable? Did they have redeeming qualities that helped you understand their behavior?
- Why do you think the playwright wrote this play?
- What do you think will happen next to Jaja, to Marie, to the others, to the shop?

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES

MONOLOGUE WRITING: PRIDE IN THE WORK

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Cr1.1-II.c.

The main characters in *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* have a special skill, from which they earn a living. Do any of your students have an identifiable skill? Do any of their parents, relatives, or acquaintances? If not, perhaps they could interview a skilled worker in their community or do research about a specific job (short order cook, hair dresser, store manager, etc.). Ask them to write a monologue for themselves, a relative, or acquaintance (fictionalized to the extent they choose) or indeed, for an entirely fictional skilled worker. (Jocelyn Bioh's characters are presumably fictional, but based on aspects of actual hair braiders she encountered over the years.)

In the monologue, addressed to a fictional new acquaintance, the character describes the skill they possess, how they learned or developed it, maybe mentions some challenges or setbacks they have faced, and expresses pride in their special competence.



Ask students to share their monologues to the extent they are comfortable doing so.

DRAWING CONNECTIONS

National Core Arts Standards: TH:Re7.1-III.a., TH:Re8.1-I.b., TH:Re8.1-II.b, TH:Re8.1-III.b, TH:Re9.1-III.c., TH:Cn10.1-I.a., TH:Cn11.1-I.a.; TH:Cn11.2-I.b.

How does this play connect to the world around us?

Individually or in small groups, ask students to find an article, news feature, interview, or other recent artifact from current events that reflects one of the play's themes or ideas. Then, have students share and discuss:

- Why is this theme or idea relevant today?
- Have they encountered the theme or idea in other artistic mediums or media?
- Does this new information alter your personal response to the production? If so, how?

What did we discover?

Ask each student to identify a topic in the play with which they were previously unfamiliar. The student should gather as much information as they can on this subject and share with the class. Sources could include articles, news features, videos, interviews, or other relevant artifacts. Guide students through the compilation of research and the structure of the sharing as best appropriate for your subject area and curricular goals.

FEEDBACK FOR MTC

We appreciate that you chose to bring Manhattan Theatre Club's production of *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* into your classroom, and we hope that your students had a great experience with these activities and the play.

You'll receive an email at the end of the month in which your class had access to the performance recording. Please complete the Lights Up! Library Feedback Form linked in that email so that we can continue to improve this initiative.