

## Welcome to Center Theatre Group and *The Convert* by Danai Gurira.

.....

SET IN 1895 IN THE REGION THAT WOULD BECOME ZIMBABWE, Jekesai must choose between her family's traditions and the Christian faith and Western values she has embraced. Playwright Danai Gurira was born in the United States and raised in Zimbabwe and brings her unique perspective and distinct voice to create a new play filled with humor and compassion.

Gurira believes that "the more specific you are in your cultural expression, the more human you are going to be." And through her incredible specificity, she has created characters whose human emotions and struggles we recognize, even though they live in a time and place far from our own.

Ownership and identity, past and future, oppression and freedom. What makes you who you are? What is your truth? What do you have faith in? Who do you believe in?

Turn the page to explore the importance of land to the Shona people, think about language and its connection to our identity, reflect on the power of a name for both a person and a country, and read an interview with playwright Danai Gurira on the impact of colonization and the struggle for freedom.

*The Convert* doesn't give simple answers or give its characters easy choices. Like all good theatre, this play raises questions and challenges audience members to discover their own answers. See what questions this information raises for you and what answers the performance provides. Thank you so much for joining us for *The Convert*. We look forward to seeing you at the theatre!

"Change is a  
kind of a tricky  
business  
my friend."

—*The Convert*

# THE CONVERT

BY Danai Gurira  
DIRECTED BY Emily Mann

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Kirk Douglas Theatre

Image courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

# THE CONVERT

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“There is a grappling with home, place, space and voice...”

—Danai Gurira

### Convert – v.

To change (something) into another form, substance, state, or product; transform.

### A Convert – n.

One who has been converted, especially from one religion or belief to another.

1895, RHODESIA. The country known today as Zimbabwe has been colonized and overtaken by British miners in search of gold and diamonds. Tired of being mistreated, the native people are growing angry and impatient toward the settlers. There is a great deal of tension between the two parties and one can feel a rebellion brewing across the land. A young Shona woman named Jekesai arrives at Master Chilford's home. She has escaped her village with the help of her cousin and aunt in order to not be sold off and become the tenth wife to an old man. Her father has passed away and so she is now considered the property of her uncle, who is only interested in making a profit. Mai Tamba, Jekesai's aunt, works at Chilford's home and asks him if the girl can stay and work alongside her. Chilford, an educated African man who holds a high administrative position in the Church, has renounced the traditional ways of Jekesai's people and works tirelessly to convert them to Christianity. Chilford reluctantly agrees to have the girl stay with the condition that she be baptized and educated. Jekesai is thrilled since she dreams of going to school and learning English. Chilford renames her Ester, and so begins her new life as a convert.

Grateful for her deliverance, Ester becomes a true believer in the teachings of the Church. She learns to speak English and dreams of someday being able to translate and share the Bible with other members of her community. But soon, Ester finds herself at a crossroads: will she have to give up the ways of her people in order to have the future she desires?



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## Language

Shona is a Bantu language, native to the people of Zimbabwe and parts of Zambia, Botswana, and Mozambique. Under colonial rule, many legal and business transactions took place in English. Shona-speaking people who learned English were better able to participate in these transactions. English is still used to conduct business but Shona, along with another native language called Ndebele, remain Zimbabwe's official languages. It is estimated that there are 14 million native Shona speakers living today.

● The playwright, Danai Gurira, wrote this play using two languages, English and Shona. Why do you think she decided to do this? What was it like to experience parts of the play in a language you do not know?

In *The Convert*, Ester is forced to learn English as a way of showing her commitment to transformation. Chilford views her native Shona language as uncivilized and considers its use an act of defiance against the Church.

- Is English your first language? What languages are spoken in your home?
- Have you ever had to choose between English and another language?
- How did that choice make you feel?

## What do you believe in?

Each character in *The Convert* has different beliefs about religion, tradition, and spirituality. Looked at together, they represent the broad spectrum of points of view illustrated in *The Convert*. While the other characters that we meet in the play have already chosen their paths, Ester is searching for where she belongs and what she most deeply believes.

### Discovery Guide

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**CHILFORD** — A native Zimbabwean raised and educated in the Catholic Church. A deeply religious man, he has chosen to renounce the language and customs that he knew as a child in order to fully embrace the ways of the British settlers. He does not believe two cultures and two religions can coexist, nor that they should. To him, becoming “Westernized” is the key to progress, to a more dynamic civilization. Chilford dreams of someday becoming a priest and having his own church, although no native African has ever held that position. He has taken on the ways of the White settlers, but he is still a Black man living in a deeply segregated society.



**PRUDENCE** — A self-proclaimed “oddy,” Prudence is a highly educated Zimbabwean woman who follows the ways of the British in order to progress and make an impact on the world. She is far more educated than any of her male counterparts, yet because she is a woman, her social status depends on her marriage to Chancellor. Although she is quite “Westernized” in her opinions and behavior, Prudence also holds on tightly to her identity as “a Matebele, a daughter of warriors.”



**MAI TAMBA** — “Mother of the Earth.” Ester's aunt and Tamba's mother, a Shona woman who works as a housekeeper for Chilford. She follows the ways of the British in order to appease Chilford and maintain her job. She is a firm believer in her peoples' traditions and believes that her world can coexist with that of the Church.



“I must, I must heed to my calling. I am a new creature.”

—*The Convert*

# Who are you?

ESTER IS A YOUNG WOMAN WITH BIG DREAMS. She wants to go to school, learn English, and ultimately educate her people—options not available to women in traditional Shona culture at that time. Joining the Church could make those dreams a reality, but to become a Catholic she is required to give up all that defines her as a young Shona woman. She must change her birth name, Jekesai, to a given English name, Ester; leave behind her native language for English; and ultimately, choose between the traditions and rituals of her family and her new-found faith. She finds herself caught between two cultures: where she comes from, and who she hopes to someday become.

## Identity

“the state of having unique identifying characteristics held by no other person or thing.”

- What makes you who you are?
- Is it where you come from? The people you love? The choices you make? Your dreams?

“In the first and the foremost, I must be introducing myself to you properly.

My name, it is Jekesai Wekwa Chiyangwa Murumbira. You have been giving me this name Master, Ester, and it is a good name. I have been liking it all this time, but today I must be giving you my name Master, Jekesai, it means to illuminate.”

—*The Convert*

## Choice

Throughout *The Convert*, Ester must make many choices. Each new decision further shapes her identity. Her conversion includes not only embracing new ideas and beliefs, but in being asked to turn away from her family and tribal traditions. We watch her struggle to balance her past and her future.

- Have you ever felt like you have had to let go of a part of yourself to become something new? Is there something that you would be willing to sacrifice to achieve your dreams? What would you never let go of?
- Do you believe that two different faiths or traditions can peacefully coexist? In a person? In a family? In a country?

## What's in a name?

Chilford's first step in converting Shona people to the Christian faith is renaming them, replacing their “pagan” name with a biblical one. Jekesai, whose name means “to illuminate” in her native Shona, is given the name Ester. Believed to be of Persian origin, meaning “star,” her new name comes from the Book of Esther in the Old Testament. It is said that Queen Esther foiled a plot to murder all the Jews of her kingdom, risking her life to save her people. Given her goals to translate and teach, Chilford considers Ester a well-suited name, and unconsciously reflective of her birth name, as both refer to sources of light.

- Do you know the meaning of your name?
- Do you know why you were given your name?
- Have you ever wanted to change your name? Why?
- What if your name were taken from you? Would having a different name change who you are?

**CHANCELLOR** — A Zimbabwean man raised and educated alongside Chilford at a Catholic missionary school. He works as an interpreter for the White mine owners and is interested in gaining both status and material wealth. He is a Catholic in the company of fellow church members, and a “son of the soil” in the presence of his native people. He is engaged to Prudence.



**TAMBA** — Ester's cousin and Mai Tamba's son, a young Zimbabwean man who works as a miner for the British. He is angry and frustrated with how his people are being treated by the settlers. He believes that his people must take back their land and fight for the survival of their traditional ways.



**UNCLE** — Ester's and Tamba's uncle, Mai Tamba's younger brother, and an older Shona man who follows the traditional ways of his people. Ester's father has recently passed away. According to Shona custom, Uncle is now the young girl's guardian and able to decide who she marries. He has chosen to sell her off to a much older man who already has multiple wives. In exchange for his niece, he will be given cattle, known as *roora* or “bride-price.”



**Belief** — *n.*  
A state or habit of mind in which trust or confidence is placed in some person or thing.

**Faith** — *n.*  
Confident belief in the truth, value, or trustworthiness of a person, idea, or thing.

“I am a son of the soil, FOR SURE, Sekuru! And have ALWAYS been so.”

—The Convert

This play takes place in the nation of Zimbabwe, which is located in southern Africa, between the Zambezi and Limpopo rivers. The name “Zimbabwe” can be translated from Shona to mean “sacred house,” “venerated houses,” “houses of stone,” “ritual seat of the king,” or “home or grave of the chief.”

“...singing me over to the ancestors, calling them to receive me.”

—The Convert

## Connection

The Shona's connection to their land is deeply religious and spiritual. They believe that *Pasi*, or the ground/world below, belongs to their ancestors. As long as the deceased are remembered by the living, their spirits may be called upon in time of need. Land is sacred because it is both a place of burial and a gift passed down from one generation to the next. A person who lives on ancestral soil is known as a “child of the soil” and is believed to have a psychic connection with those who came before them. For most Shona, the spiritual world of their ancestors, like the ground under their feet, is an ever-present fact.

Traditionally, no one in the Shona culture owned land. Instead, the chief was in charge of all property and held onto it as a link between his community and their ancestors. *Chisi*, or the tradition of having sacred days dedicated to the spirits where no work is done on the land, continues today. The mystical and psychic connection that exists with the land is also why the Shona choose to hold all important ceremonies there.

- Do you have a personal connection to a specific place or part of nature? Why does this place matter to you?
- Have you ever had the opportunity to explore the natural world within Los Angeles? What did you see, hear, feel, experience?

“It is the struggle for freedom.”

—The Convert

## Colonization

Cecil Rhodes was an English businessman who struck it rich mining diamonds in South Africa. In 1888 he devised a plan to take control of all of the gold mines in Mashonaland (northern Zimbabwe). In order to execute his plan, Rhodes tricked the Ndebele leader, King Lobengula, into granting the British exclusive rights to his kingdom's valuable minerals by falsely promising that no more than ten Englishmen would be mining in his state at one time. He then informed the British government that King Lobengula had given Great Britain the right to occupy Mashonaland, an area over which he had no actual legal authority. Rhodes was granted a charter by Queen Victoria which allowed his British South Africa Company (BSAC) to become the administrative power in the region.

The BSAC was allowed complete authority and began to establish police forces, railways and banks and sent the Pioneer Column (settlers protected by the BSAC) to occupy Mashonaland. Once there, the settlers built forts and began to take land from the Shona people.

The British imposed a “hut tax” on every dwelling. This forced the Shona to have to sell their possessions and work for the settlers in order to obtain cash, which they had never used or needed before. Tensions grew and were made worse by an epidemic that wiped out all the cattle. Shona spiritual leaders, interpreting the epidemic as a sign of the ancestors' anger at the British occupation of the land, called for rebellion. First the Ndebele and then the Shona rose up against the colonists. While the revolution was initially successful, the British colonists had the resources needed to end the revolt. Leaders of the rebellion were captured and many executed.

The British settlers used the rebellion as an excuse to overthrow King Lobengula's kingdom and divide his land among their settlers. Cecil Rhodes now claimed the country. He renamed it Rhodesia, after himself, in 1895. *The Convert* takes place during this turbulent time from 1895 to 1897.

In contrast to the Shona's ancestral connection, the British colonizers' relationship to land was based on an idea of ownership. The African land was valued mainly for the riches and resources it could provide the settlers.

- Has a piece of land ever felt valuable to you? Why was it valuable?
- What would it feel like to have people from another country claim ownership to land your family has lived on for generations?
- Imagine being told that your language, beliefs and religion were uncivilized. Imagine being forced to give them up. How would that feel?
- What if giving up these traditions gave you opportunities you didn't have before? What would you do?

### 200 to 1000 A.D

Bantu people from Northern Africa migrate and settle in the southern part of the continent.

### 1100 to 1700

The city-state known as Great Zimbabwe is created and ruled by successive Bantu empires.

### 1830s

Ndebele people fleeing Zulu violence move north and settle in what becomes known as Matabeleland.

### 1830-1890s

European hunters, traders, and missionaries explore the region. They include Cecil Rhodes of the British South Africa Company.

### 1855

Scottish missionary and explorer David Livingstone visits Zimbabwe and sees *Mosi-oo-Tunya* (“the smoke that thunders”), the extraordinary waterfalls on the northern border of Zimbabwe. He renames them Victoria Falls after Queen Victoria.

### 1890

Cecil Rhodes, Director of the British South African Company and founder of the diamond mining company DeBeers, receives a British mandate to colonize southern Zimbabwe, which he later renamed Rhodesia after himself. He sends the company's “Pioneer Column” into Mashonaland in northern Zimbabwe, creating the first occupation of the country by the British.

### 1891

Mashonaland and Matabeleland are declared a British protectorate—a state that is protected both diplomatically and militarily by another governing country.

### 1896

Shona and Ndebele tribes stage two separate unsuccessful uprisings against the British South Africa Company. Both tribes are defeated in what is known as the Matabele Wars. The protectorate is then divided into Northern Rhodesia and Southern Rhodesia.

### 1902

Cecil Rhodes dies. He is buried at Matopos Hills in present day southern Zimbabwe.

### 1922

The British South Africa Company administration ends; Rhodesia's White minority opts for self-government.

### 1923

Great Britain annexes Rhodesia as a colony—a territory that is part of a larger, governing country.



# Women's Choices.

AS WAS TRUE OF MOST SOCIETIES AT THE TIME, in 1895, women born in Mashonaland were faced with limited choices. Shona culture was almost exclusively patrilineal, meaning that all inheritances (whether property, titles, or names) were passed down through the men. The community was run by a chief, who had a council of men that helped him with issues of law and customs. To marry a woman, a man had to pay her father with cattle. This payment was typically known as *roora* or “bride-price,” and it acknowledged the cost and effort that the bride’s parents spent on her upbringing.

The traditional Zimbabwean woman looked forward to taking on the roles of a wife and mother. Through marriage and childbirth, women were able to consolidate their domestic position and social status. Men and women both gained seniority with age and their views in family decision-making and community deliberations carried more weight. Mothers were regarded as sacred; but a woman was most influential when she became a grandmother.

For women who did not want to follow the traditional path of marriage and motherhood, the Church offered them the opportunity to go to school. Missionary schools often provided an excellent education. Nevertheless, even educated women were expected to play a limited role within colonial society.

- Do you feel that your gender affects your life choices today? Does it affect what people expect you to do?
- What about the generation before you? Think of the people who raised you: do you think their life choices were shaped in any way by their gender? How?
- How do you think that women’s roles in the world have changed since the time that this play took place? What hasn’t changed? What still needs to change?

## Missionaries

The first Catholic missionaries to enter Zimbabwe were the Jesuits, who arrived in old Bulawayo in 1880. Although the missionaries worked closely with the British government in helping to colonize Zimbabwe, most of them were motivated by a true belief in the work that they were doing. They viewed the native people as lost, without the power and salvation of a Western God. These missionaries devoted their lives to teaching the people of

Zimbabwe about the Catholic Church, believing that they were leading them to salvation.

In spite of the initial opposition, particularly from older generations, Christianity spread among the Shona and Ndebele. This was helped by both the newly available translations of scriptures into local languages as well as the missionaries’ commitment to provide all converts with a Western education.

## Education

In 1899, the British government created a Department of Education in Rhodesia. The department’s focus was the education of Whites in the area, not of Africans. Christian missions were offered land and grants as rewards for establishing segregated schools that would produce African workers who could serve the White community in both the agricultural and industrial sectors. As in the California missions, the education received in the Zimbabwean missions was initially religiously centered, but soon began to include academic, industrial, and teacher training.

In the play, Ester desires an education in order to someday “translate and teach.” She has different goals than those expected of a young

Shona woman her age. In order to achieve these goals, she must make the difficult decision of leaving behind her family, village, and all of the traditions that she has been raised with.

- What is the value of education for you? Where do you hope it will lead you?
- Have you ever had to sacrifice for your education?
- Has anyone else ever sacrificed so that you could receive an education? Who was it? What did this person do or give up for your chance at an education?

Ester: (defiantly) AIWA! Hanzi chi?!  
[NO! What did he say?!]

MaiTamba: Hanzi urikuenda kuchikoro. School.  
[He says you will go to school]

Ester: Chikoro chevarungu?  
[School like for whites?]

Mai Tamba: Eh ey. Like for whites.

Ester: (excitedly) Eeeeeey!!  
(snapping her fingers)

Pascale Armand. PHOTO BY CHARLES ERICKSON.

# Women's Voices.



## A conversation with Danai Gurira

and Center Theatre Group  
Teaching Artist Marcos Najera.

**MARCOS NAJERA:** Danai, I've heard you share this wonderful quote from the anti-apartheid activist Stephen Biko. Will you share that quote from his speech in Cape Town, South Africa 1971, and what that quote means to you?

**DANAI GURIRA:** "The greatest weapon of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed." I really think it sums up a lot of what is in the play *The Convert*.

In the case of Africa, you look at colonization and you say 'okay, this force came on a continent of people that outnumbered them. But they figured out how to leverage power in such a way where they became in control of a lot of the power dynamics on the land they were on.'

I think there are aspects of what pathologies result in colonization. And that's all in the mind. And in the psyche. And in the understanding of self.

I think that that quote is about what Steve Biko was trying to awaken. The idea in the African that we have to really be stewards over our minds. And what we have absorbed and what we have been taught and how that is inaccurate. And how that is an oppressive tactic. I think there are certain characters in the play where you see that really playing. And then you see it in the battle of the mind and the soul of the convert herself.

**Which is Jekesai.**

Well, you know, I think we could leave it up in the air as to who 'The' convert is to some extent! (laughs)

**It could even be us in the audience. (laughs) Let's establish the world of the play a bit. Can you help us understand what is happening in Africa at that time?**

Well, there are many things happening. Zimbabwe, what is then Rhodesia, is becoming a colony. Which means the white colonial forces from Europe are really locking it in as a piece of land that they are going to govern and occupy and utilize for their own aggrandizement. Basically, that is what 'colonization' is.

**For many students, this may be the first time they are thinking about 'turf' in this way.**

Right, and it really is about turf. And that is something that is still being dealt with in Africa, the idea of land ownership. The land was taken in a way that was very unjust.

Though thankfully, there was a war for independence in the 1970s in Africa, which resulted in Zimbabweans regaining ownership, being able to vote—which wasn't allowed. Blacks weren't allowed to vote until 1980 in Zimbabwe. And it wasn't Zimbabwe until 1980—it was

Rhodesia. So that's what is happening in this play. You see the beginnings of that dynamic. You see the very moment where the white colonial forces have taken over this land.

Also—along came Christianity. Now, Christianity, I don't have any condemnation towards it. It's the way it was utilized. But it's very complicated—because there were also—there are ways, one could argue, that it helped people. Like Jekesai. So there is a very complex relationship that the African has with Christianity. And ultimately, I think it's a choice and it's a faith. I grew up in a Christian home and I'm still a practicing Christian, but I understand all of the complexities that come along with choice of your faith.

**Why would the African people accept this colonial practice of imposing ideas like religion, taxes and money on them? Did they not have any type of physical military presence to fight back at the time? Why would that happen?**

I think *that* is the question that actually is the source of the Africans' pathology. Why did we let colonization happen? How did we participate? Did we not do enough? I think there is something in that question that is very tricky for the African even today. And through this play, I started to investigate it. There is an insecurity: we will never know what we would have been if we had defeated them. If we would have been allowed to evolve without this massive imposition of colonization. We will never know. That gaping interruption of our own self-evolution is something we still grapple with in terms of the complexity of our identity as Africans.

The imposition, and the taking over of land, it did occur. But it lasted less than 100 years, which historically is not that long. Because the war for independence in Zimbabwe, for instance—which I've started to research for another play...

**Because *The Convert* is part of longer series of stories from you about Zimbabwe?**

Right, right.

**The war for independence, does it have an actual title?**

It doesn't really. Some people call it 'The Second Chimurenga' which means 'the second struggle for freedom.'

**'Chimurenga' means 'struggle' in Shona?**

Yes, and 'The First Chimurenga' was the one that happens during this play.

**Chimurenga. What a fantastic word.**

(laughs) Yes, it was a war that Zimbabweans hold very, very dearly and with great pride because it did ultimately result in the independence of Zimbabwe in 1980. So that was the recovery.

When you look at it, it wasn't a long time period that Africa was colonized. It actually wasn't. But the beauty, I think, of Africa is that we got it back. And you can't say that about lots of other parts of the world. One could argue the United States, as an example of a country where the original inhabitants never regained control of their land. Ever.

**I'm curious to know the story of your great aunt on your mother's side. Can you tell us how it inspired you?**

Sure. I had already started doing some historical research and I had wanted to tell this story *The Convert* anyway. But then I found out that my great aunt was a young girl and her aunt passed away. And so, as is tradition, she was to step in as the new wife to her uncle-in-law.

**Like Jekesai. Whose uncle is ordering her to marry a much older man.**

And in the case of my great aunt [who was a teenager at the time], she fled. She fled to the Catholic Church. And her family disowned her. And she became a sister, a nun of the Catholic Church. And she was very, very active in education, and eventually did reunite with her family.

And was very well-known and well-respected for the work she did in the education of rural children.

**Your great aunt's story helps us understand a bit more about what it was like to be a young woman at this time. Now, let's talk about the men.**

**Many of the students who are coming to this play recently saw *A Raisin in the Sun*. And they met the character of Walter Lee, who in many ways is stripped of his masculinity.**

**Now, they will meet the character of Tamba, another young man. Can you help us understand what was stripping Tamba of his masculinity in this story? Is it similar to Walter Lee?**

Yes, yes. There are power dynamics that they have no control over. And they are power dynamics that are designed for [these men] not to excel. There's not some well-worn path of how a Black man in 1950s Chicago is going to navigate to the top of the pile. It's the same thing, big time, in colonial Africa. They were creating systems where they would take the people they could exploit most easily to be their cheap labor.

And the choices, as Tamba talks about, were stripped away from him. His desire to do what his ancestors have designed for him to do—become the head of a clan and to be a part of a familial society where you take care of each other and you make your own decisions as a man—were being stripped away from him.

**Thank you. Let's turn to language. Our students will get to hear actors speak the beautiful dialect of Shona onstage. Danai, as a native speaker, what is your favorite word in Shona?**

I think one of my favorite words in Shona is 'tariro' and that means 'hope.'

**Thank you so much for your time. Oh! What do the onstage hand claps mean?**

The clap is called Kuwombera. The men do it differently than women. Only Tamba does it actually. His hands are like. (Clap) That. (That).

(She claps with both hands facing each other flat, fingertips and wrists meeting)

They are clapping long ways. And the women, it's sideways.

(She claps with her hands cupped and crossed)

It's generally an expression of respect. It's an expression of thanks. It's how you say Thank (claps) You (claps). It's how you greet. (claps) Makadini (claps) you can greet like that. It's a greeting and an expression of thanks.

**Danai, to you I say (Kuwombera clap, masculine form).**

And to you I say, (Kuwombera clap, feminine form). Tatenda! Tinotenda! Yes, I thank you.

I think Shona is beautiful and it's so specific and expressive and tonal and from the gut. It also has sounds in it that are not in any other language, like my name! Danai. And no one can do it except Shona speakers.

# "We Continue."

—*The Convert*

## Center Theatre Group Education and Community Partnerships

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### Education and Community Partnerships

Theatre is an enduring and powerful tool for communicating ideas, stories, emotions and beliefs that fuel the intellect, imagination and creative spirit. Center Theatre Group believes that stimulating awareness, creativity, dialogue and an inquisitive mind is integral to the growth and well-being of the individual and the community; and that nurturing a life-long appreciation of the arts leads inextricably to an engaged and enlightened society.

Center Theatre Group's education and community partnership programs advance the organization's mission in three key ways:

**Audiences:** Inspiring current and future audiences to discover theatre and its connection to their lives;

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