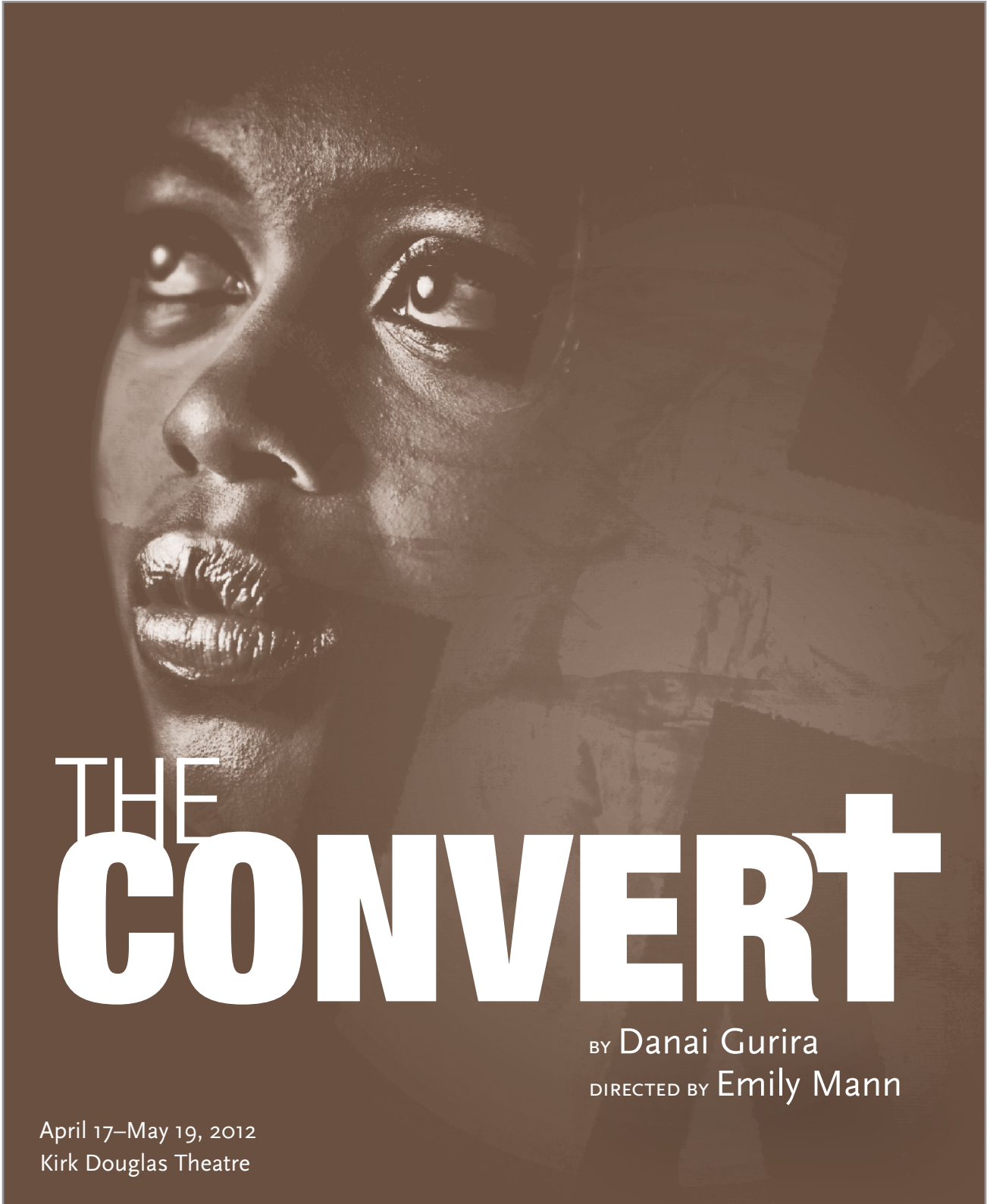




# Educator Resources



# THE CONVERT

BY Danai Gurira

DIRECTED BY Emily Mann

April 17–May 19, 2012  
Kirk Douglas Theatre

Image courtesy of Goodman Theatre.

# Welcome

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Center Theatre Group is excited to have you and your students join us for *The Convert* by Danai Gurira. A great play raises questions about the human condition, and a great educational experience allows students an opportunity to reflect upon those questions and begin to discover their own answers. To that end the material in Center Theatre Group's Student Discovery Guide and Educator Resources raise questions: questions about identity and ownership, about past and future, about oppression and freedom. Our goal is to provide you with a variety of entry points into the play so that you can choose what best suits you and your students.

The Educator Resources and Student Discovery Guide are companion pieces that are designed to help you prepare your students to see the play and to follow-up the performance with options for discussion, reflection and creativity.

We have organized the Educator Resources into the following sections:

### Student Discovery Guide

The Student Discovery Guide provides students with background information about the play and the subject matter, as well as questions for individual reflection. Written to be student-driven, the Discovery Guide helps prepare your students for the performance.

### About This Play

This section includes a detailed synopsis of the play.

### Comprehension

This section includes background information about the subject matter of the play. We have selected the information that most directly connects to or informs what happens in the play. This section furthers and deepens the background information provided in the student Discovery Guide. This section can be shared before the play and/or discussed after the performance. It can also be used to provide research topics for your classroom.



L.A.'s Theatre Company

Ahmanson Theatre  
Mark Taper Forum  
Kirk Douglas Theatre

601 West Temple Street  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

## Connection

This section provides ways to explore connections between the ideas presented in the play, the students' lives, and the world we live in. Structured thematically, each section contains questions and exercises that may be used for reflection, discussion, and/or writing prompts both before and after the performance.

## Creativity

This section provides opportunities for your students to use theatre to explore and express. Theatre activities are included that examine both specific artistic aspects of the production, as well as delve deeper into the ideas and questions raised by *The Convert*. The activities and information in this section can be used both before and after the performance.

We know the hard work and dedication that it takes to bring students to see theatre. These materials are designed to support you in making the most of that experience. We applaud your passion for sharing theatre with your students, and thank you for sharing your students with all of us at Center Theatre Group. We look forward to seeing you at the theatre!

# About *The Convert*

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## Scene-by-Scene Synopsis

### Act 1, Scene 1

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 10th 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 is an educated man who holds a high administrative position in the church and is against the traditional ways of Jekesai's people. After Jekesai's uncle arrives at the house and tries to take her back home, Chilford defends the girl and agrees to have her stay with him. He does so, with the condition that she be baptized and educated. Jekesai is thrilled since she dreams of going to school and learning English. Her uncle becomes angry with Chilford and calls him a *Bafu* ("a white man's native" or a "traitor") before reluctantly leaving. Chilford renames Jekesai Ester, and so begins her new life as a convert.

### Scene 2

A few months have passed. Ester is slowly settling into her life as a domestic servant in Chilford's home. Chancellor, Chilford's childhood friend, pays him a visit. Although both men are native Zimbabweans, they were raised and educated together at a Catholic missionary school. Chancellor now works as an interpreter for White mine owners and is interested in gaining both status and material wealth. Chilford introduces Ester and has her demonstrate all that he has taught her. She performs for them. The two men then begin discussing the political tensions in their country. Chancellor tells Chilford that the natives are getting ready to rebel against the settlers, and that they need to be careful since they are seen as traitors to their own people. Chancellor brings up Ester again and comments on her being attractive, and asks Chilford if he is being intimate with her. Chilford lets him know that he is practicing celibacy since he wishes to enter the priesthood someday soon. Chancellor makes it clear that he would happily take advantage of Ester if Chilford doesn't mind. Chilford reminds him that he has a fiancée, Prudence. Prudence then arrives, looking for Chancellor. She introduces herself to Ester before the couple rushes out the door.



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### Scene 3

Chilford reprimands Ester for having corrected Father Bart (a White priest) when he misquoted the Bible. He tells her that in the future, she is never allowed to correct a White, even if they are wrong. Mai Tamba then asks Chilford if she can take Ester back to their village to celebrate her father's Kurova Guva (the one year ceremony of his death) with her family. Chilford says no and tells both women that if they are to be part of the church, then they must leave their old ways behind. Mai Tamba believes that it is important for Ester to attend the ritual gathering. But Chilford feels that if she does go, then she is proving that she is not a true Catholic. Ultimately, Ester decides that the path she is on is what she must adhere to and stays behind.

### Act 2, Scene 1

Ester and her cousin Tamba sit at Chilford's home, discussing opposing faiths. Tamba believes in *Mwari*, the Supreme Being within the Shona community. For Ester, it is the Roman Catholic God whom she chooses to worship. Ester also expresses her deep desire to take her newly found teachings and share them with their people. The conversation quickly escalates into a heated debate, and Tamba ends up calling Ester a *Bafu*. Tamba works in the diamond mines and has grown frustrated by the way that the settlers are treating his people. He warns Ester that many are getting ready to rebel and that when they do, she should not be around traitors like Chilford or Chancellor. As Tamba leaves, Prudence enters. She and Ester have a conversation about traditions and allowing what they learned in childhood to coexist with the ways of the Catholic Church. Although she is a Catholic, Prudence still holds onto her Matabele roots. She believes that it is possible to have both. After Prudence leaves, Chilford arrives home. He tells Ester that he is getting ready to speak to one of the Church's leaders, Father Helm, about his desire to pursue the priesthood. He also shares with Ester that he believes that in her, he has found his first, true protégé. She is deeply moved.

### Scene 2

Later that night Chancellor arrives at Chilford's door looking quite frazzled. He has a small open wound on his forehead. He tells Chilford that just as he had predicted, the native people have started to rebel, and the first White family has already been slaughtered. The gash on his forehead was his warning, if he continues to work with the British, they will come after him. He also informs

Chilford of the painful news that Father Helm was attacked on the road while traveling and murdered. Chilford falls apart. All of his hopes and dreams of becoming a Jesuit priest feel impossible now. Chancellor tells Chilford that he plans on taking off in order to be safe. He encourages Chilford to do the same. Ester, however, tells Chilford that they must continue to do the work that Father Helm encouraged them to do and spread the word of the Bible among the people of their country. Mai Tamba tells them that continuing with this type of work will only anger the natives even more and create more tension. Her people are tired of being forced to appropriate the traditions of the settlers. They want to be free. Chilford becomes angry at hearing Mai Tamba's words. The conversation escalates and Mai Tamba accuses Chilford's father of having been a witch doctor. Chilford is stunned and throws her out of the house. Chancellor sits with Chilford and tries to calm him down.

### Scene 3

Later that night, after Chilford has gone to sleep, Chancellor makes an advance on Ester. When she denies him, he attempts to rape her. They struggle, and just as he has her pinned to the ground, a loud knock is heard at the door. Ester escapes and Chancellor opens the door. Ester's Uncle and cousin Tamba enter intoxicated and angry. Chancey tries to win them over by offering them whiskey and making small talk. Tamba begins telling him that he was fired today from the mine and that his mother (Mai Tamba) also lost her job working for Chilford. Tamba expresses his frustration with the ways of the White settlers and how badly they mistreat his people. Uncle then asks Chancellor what side he is on. Chancellor claims to be a "son of the soil" just like them. When Tamba tries to take Chancellor's watch, a scuffle ensues. The men begin fighting and Tamba ends up beating Chancellor to death. Ester enters and witnesses the aftermath of the attack. She helps the two men make it look like it was a robbery. She then tells them to run away. Just as they are about to leave, Tamba turns and tells Ester that she is not a *Bafu* after all. Once they are gone, she yells for Chilford.

### Act 3, Scene 1

A few months later. Chilford and Ester arrive home. She quickly begins writing as he dictates. Prudence enters intoxicated. She asks them if there are any new suspects or leads in Chancellor's murder. When Chilford says no, she begins grilling Ester on the details of the night of the attack. Ester lies and tells them

that she heard Chancellor screaming and then he was quiet. She ran in to see what was happening and when she arrived he was already dead and the murderer had fled. Mai Tamba then appears. Ester is very happy to see her. Mai Tamba has come seeking advice. Her son, Tamba, is accused of murdering a mine owner and the police have told her that she must turn him in or they will bring her in instead. She has brought Tamba with her since they have no other place for him to hide. Mai Tamba then hands Chilford Chancellor's watch. When Chilford sees this he becomes angry and calls for Prudence. Tamba then admits to both of them that he was the one to take Chauncy's life. Although still devastated over her fiancée's death, Prudence asks Chilford to let Tamba go. She knows that turning this young man in will not bring Chancellor back, and it will not give her unborn child a father. Chilford, however, wants Tamba to turn himself in to the authorities because he is also a suspect in another murder, although he is innocent. Tamba agrees to turn himself in, and Prudence and Ester agree to represent him in the Native Commissioner's court.

## Scene 2

Later that evening Prudence returns to the house and tells Chilford that Tamba was killed as soon as they arrived at the court. Mai Tamba then returned to her village and Ester ran off. Prudence then tells Chilford that she will visit the witch doctor in the morning and have an abortion. She does not want to bring a child into such a chaotic world.

## Scene 3

Much later that night, Ester arrives at the house and tells Chilford that since the Catholic Church will never allow him to become a priest, he must start his own church. She then asks him if she can confess something to him. He hesitates at first, and says that they should probably wait to speak with Father Bart, but Ester insists. She then admits that after they killed Tamba in front of her like a chicken, she realized that all of the studying and learning that she has been doing will not change her position within their society. It will not give her the equality and freedom that she has been seeking because the system is corrupt. The settlers who have established this hierarchy are making things worse for her people. She claims that her father's spirit came to her and told her that she must help take back the land that is rightfully hers and "shed blood for her own." Ester admits that she killed the White family

that she works for. She takes off her robe and reveals her blood- drenched clothes. She tells Chilford that the police will be coming for her and that she needs to be absolved of her sin. Chilford urges her to run, but Ester refuses. She acknowledges what she has done and accepts it. She is at peace with her decision. As she waits for the authorities to come for her she asks Chilford to join her in a native song dedicated to the God they worship.



# Comprehension

Comprehension | Connections | Creativity

This section includes background information about the setting and subject matter of the play.

We have selected the information that most directly connects to or informs what happens in the play. This section furthers and deepens the background information provided in the Student Discovery Guide. This section can be shared before the play and/or discussed after the performance. It can also be used to provide research topics for your classroom.

## The Shona and the Mwari

Within the traditional Shona culture, *Mwari* is believed to be the creator-god. Today, *Mwari* is identified as being the same God worshipped in Christianity. Before European settlers brought Christianity to southern Africa however, *Mwari* was regarded as a spirit removed from the human world—one too big and powerful to be concerned with the everyday problems of mortals. As a result, *Mwari* appointed various other spirits to act as mediators for humans. These spirits were called Vadzimu, Mhondoro, Nyanga, Shave, and Muroyi. Today, as in the past, ordinary people can only communicate with these spirits through a Masvikiro, or medium. The Masvikiro may be taken over or possessed by a spirit at any time, and the medium generally has no control over this occurrence. Music often plays a vital role in contacting spirits. Drums, known as mbira (or thumb pianos), are commonly used while audience members dance and clap. This activity is believed to call forth the immortal spirits.

The spiritual world of the Shona affects every aspect of daily life. Even Shona leaders believe that their authority is inherited from their ancestors. When a community decides to appoint a chief, a Mhondoro (community spirit) is consulted. A medium will then relay the spirit's choice of leader. In essence, the Mhondoro always selects the chief. Shona religion is also closely related to medicine. If a person suddenly becomes ill, it is believed to be the result of an offended spirit. Sacrifices, such as a slaughtered goat, are customarily offered in order to appease the angry spirit and achieve a cure for the ailing.

Many Shona believe that the spirits of the ancestors are always present. Shona followers of Christian churches point out that the Bible also encourages all of its followers to love, honor, and respect their parents, even after the parents are deceased.

The *bira* is a ceremony held by a family in order to communicate with one of their deceased ancestors. The ritual is performed during an all-night ceremony where family members and neighbors come together and communicate with the spirit of the deceased through a medium. The *bira* begins at sundown. Generally, the family will brew special beer to share with the spirits, and will hire a *mbira*, or drum ensemble, to play music. The men sit separately from the women and children, and everyone drinks from designated pots. All attendees take off their watches, shoes, and any other objects that the

ancestors would not recognize from their time on earth. The medium sits on a mat facing the musicians, and listens to the problems that have caused the family to seek spiritual counsel. The medium becomes possessed by the ancestral spirit (or spirits) and is able to then communicate with the family in the voice of their relative. *Biras* were traditionally held on land that was occupied by the ancestors. In more modern times, however, they have been known to take place in specially built enclosures, or village round houses, used only for religious occasions.

## Shona Spirits

*Vadzimu* are the group of ancestral spirits that continue to influence the lives of their living family members. Shona children are taught to follow the ways of the ancestral spirits and to respect their elders. If a child shows disrespect or disobeys an elder, it is believed that the elder's ancestral spirit may come back after death and cause problems for the child.

*Mhondoro* is the spirit who watches over the entire community and brings all good things to its people. For example, if there is abundant rain, then people give thanks to the Mhondoro. A day of rest is observed in all Shona villages as a way of honoring the goodness of this spirit.

*Nyanga* is a family of spirits that empower the Shona doctors. These doctors diagnose and treat all problems through divination, a process through which the spiritual causes of events and illnesses are uncovered. These doctors are believed to be the ancestors of the first Shona doctors who founded the community.

*Shave* are the spirits of foreigners who have died in Shona areas but are not buried according to the customs of their own people. These spirits are known to be continuously wandering the land in search of a medium in which they can possess. The Shave spirits are known for giving mediums special talents that they can then use to benefit their community.

*Muroyi* are evil spirits. Anyone who becomes possessed by a Muroyi is considered to be a witch, and when he or she dies that evil spirit is passed down to his or her children.

## Charwe & Spirit Rebellion

In 1896, the Matebele (or Ndebele) people organized an uprising against the British settlers is what is referred to as the “First Chimurenga.” Chimurenga is a Shona word that means “revolutionary struggle.” Spirit mediums played an integral part in this first revolt. They channeled messages from the most sacred of the Shona ancestors and from the Mwari (the Supreme Being.) These spirits encouraged the people to rid themselves and their land of the British. At this time, Charwe was a female medium who represented the Mhondoro spirit known as Nehanda, the female founder of the Shona nation. The people believed that Nehanda’s spirit was felt throughout many chiefdoms, and they believed that it was Nehanda’s strength that helped to organize them towards resistance against the colonists. Charwe was captured after the leading Shona chiefs had been executed, and she was sentenced to death. Even in captivity, Charwe defiantly refused to convert to Christianity, and she proclaimed that after her death, her “bones would rise” and ultimately defeat the White settlers.

## A Timeline of Zimbabwe’s History

**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** — While fleeing violence from the Zulu people, Matebele (or Ndebele) move north. They 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-oa-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 renames 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** — Rhodesia is declared a British protectorate (a state that is protected both diplomatically and militarily by another governing country).

**1896** — The Shona and Matebele (or Ndebele) tribes stage two separate, yet unsuccessful uprisings against the British South Africa Company. Both tribes are defeated in what is known as the Matebele 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).

**1930** — The Land Apportionment Act restricts Black access to land, forcing many into wage labor.

**1953** — Britain establishes the Central African Federation, made up of Southern Rhodesia (Zimbabwe), Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) and Nyasaland (Malawi).

**1963** — The Federation breaks up when both Zambia and Malawi gain independence.

**1964** — Ian Smith of the Rhodesian Front (RF) is elected Prime Minister. He cuts ties with Great Britain and announces Rhodesia's Unilateral Declaration on Independence.

**1966** — Civil war begins. The Zimbabwe African National Union's (ZANU) first raid on the White minority government takes place. The ZANU was a militant organization formed as a split from the Zimbabwe African People's Union (ZAPU).

**1970** — Rhodesia becomes a republic under Smith’s “pro-White” government. As a result, Black Nationalist activity and guerilla fighting increase.

**1979** — Smith agrees to accept a new constitution for the country. Elections are held and Blacks win 80% of the seats in Parliament. Robert Mugabe, leader of the ZANU, is elected Prime Minister. Mugabe signs the Lancaster House Agreement, in an effort to more equally distribute land between Blacks and Whites. This marks the beginning of Zimbabwe’s political conflicts regarding land reform.

**1980** — Rhodesia gains its international independence and is renamed Zimbabwe. It is ruled by a Black majority for the first time in its history.

**1982** — Joshua Nkomo, leader of the ZAPU, resigns as Minister of Home Affairs as tension between his party and the ZANU increases. At the same time, conflict begins to arise between the Shona and Ndebele tribes.

**1986** — Zimbabwe hosts the annual Non-Aligned Summit in Harare as a way of improving relations with other African nations.

**1987** — Violence between the ZANU and ZAPU parties breaks out. A new constitution is put into effect, eliminating the Parliamentary seats that had once been reserved for White politicians. The Presidency and Prime Ministership are combined into the position of Executive President, held by Mugabe. Mugabe and Nkomo merge their parties to form ZANU-PF in an attempt to create peace in their country and put an end to the violence.

**1991** — The Harare Declaration is adopted at a summit in Zimbabwe, reaffirming the Commonwealth of Nations’ initial aims to foster international peace and security, democracy, individual freedom, and equal rights for all.

**1998** — An economic crisis begins. It is accompanied by riots and strikes.

**1999** — The economic crisis continues. The Opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) is formed.

**2000** — Protestors seize hundreds of White-owned farms in an ongoing and violent campaign to reclaim land originally stolen by European settlers.

**2001** — Finance Minister Simba Makoni publicly acknowledges the country's economic crisis, and warns of a serious national food shortage. Most Western donors, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), decide to cut aid because of President Mugabe's land seizure program (Lancaster House Agreement of 1979.)

**2002** — Parliament passes a law limiting media freedom. The European Union imposes sanctions on Zimbabwe. Mugabe is re-elected during the Presidential elections, amid claims that the election was rigged. Zimbabwe is suspended from the Commonwealth of Nations' councils for one year after the international association concludes that Zimbabwe's elections were marred by violence. A state of disaster is declared as ongoing food shortages threaten famine.

**2003** — The leader of the Opposition Movement for Democratic Change (MDC), Morgan Tsvangirai, is arrested twice during a week of opposition protests. He is charged with treason, adding to an already existing treason charge from 2002 over an alleged plot to kill President Mugabe. Zimbabwe formally resigns from the Commonwealth of Nations after the organization decides to extend the country's suspension indefinitely.

**2004** — Opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai is acquitted of treason charges relating to an alleged plot to kill President Mugabe two years prior.

**2005** — The United States labels Zimbabwe as one of the world's "outposts of tyranny." Zimbabwe objects to the statement. The ruling ZANU-PF party wins two-thirds of the votes in the Parliamentary polls, as well as an overwhelming majority of seats in the newly created Senate. Once again, the MDC states that the election was rigged and splits its decision to boycott the poll. Tens of thousands of shanty dwellings and illegal street stalls are destroyed as part of a government sponsored "clean-up" program. An estimated 700,000 people are left homeless.

**2006** — The ruling ZANU-PF party approves a plan to move Presidential polls from 2008 to 2010, effectively extending President Mugabe's term by another two years. Riot police disrupt a planned demonstration against the government's handling of the economic crisis. Union leaders are taken into custody, tortured, and later hospitalized.

**2007** — Opposition leader Morgan Tsvangirai is hospitalized after his arrest at a rally. The ruling ZANU-PF and MDC parties hold preliminary talks in South Africa.

**2008** — Both Presidential and Parliamentary elections are held. The MDC party claims victory, but the electoral body says that although Tsvangirai had the most votes in the Presidential poll, he has not garnered enough votes to avoid a run-off against Mugabe. The run-off takes place, and Mugabe is declared the winner. The European Union and the United States widen sanctions against Zimbabwe's leaders. The country declares a national emergency over a cholera epidemic, aiding in the collapse of an already crumbling health care system.

**2009** — Tsvangirai is sworn in as Prime Minister. Later, Prime Minister Tsvangirai is injured in a car crash that kills his wife. Retail prices fall for the first time in years. A constitutional review begins. Tsvangirai tours Europe and the United States to try to gain foreign donor support. President Mugabe expresses a desire to rebuild relations with the West. Zimbabwe's High Court rejects a regional court ruling against Mugabe's land reform program.

**2010** — A new law forces foreign-owned businesses to sell majority stakes to locals. Commercial farmers claim to be experiencing a renewed wave of attacks. Zimbabwe resumes official diamond sales, amid controversy over reported rights abuses at the Marange diamond fields. The ZANU-PF party once again nominates President Mugabe as their candidate for the next presidential race. Mugabe's wife takes legal action over claims that she individually profited from illegal diamond trading.

**2011** — The European Union eases sanctions on Zimbabwe by removing the names of some of President Mugabe's supporters from a list of people whose assets had been frozen. Rights groups report rise in violence against opposition supporters throughout the country.



# Connections

Comprehension | Connections | Creativity

This section provides ways to explore connections between the ideas presented in the play, the students' lives, and the world we live in.

Structured thematically, each section contains questions and exercises that may be used for reflection, discussion, and/or writing prompts both before and after the performance.

## Power

There are many instances in the play where the characters must choose between their own culture and a new group.

The following exchange between Ester and Tamba shows Ester's heartfelt belief that she has been shown the way to a better life.

*Ester: There is so much power we can be having through Christ, these way of our people, he has come and brought the white man as our teacher to guide us from those ways.*

*Tamba: Ohhhh. What is it that is wrong with our ways?*

*Ester: Look at what happened to me, the bondage I was in. I was freed by the Lord my God. Now I can choose what I want to do, I go to school, I follow the Lord as my guide and He empowers me.*

- Ask students to pair up and read this scene aloud with each person playing a role.
- Combine two or three pairs to make several small groups of 4-6 students each.
- Ask students to consider and discuss the fact that the price of Ester's empowerment seems to be her original identity (Jekesai). What else might it cost her?
- For further discussion, ask the groups to consider the following questions:
  - ◇ What is integrity?
  - ◇ How does one obtain power?
  - ◇ How does education affect power?
  - ◇ How does money affect power?
  - ◇ Who has power in our society?
  - ◇ How did they get it?
- Each group should come up with 5 examples of people in the public eye who have changed both positively and negatively as a result of education, money, or power.
- Have the groups come back together and share their lists.
- Discuss.

## Personal Timelines

- With students in groups of four, ask each individual to take a moment to consider their own lives and the pivotal events that have brought them to where they are (e.g., the death of a family member or loved one; a move; changing schools; a specific relationship with a friend, relative or teacher).
- Students should try to isolate three specific moments that have had particular influence on them, and use those as a beginning, middle and end to a personal story or timeline.
- Students share their stories with their groups.
- Students then use the other members of their group to create one-person tableaux or “statues” to represent each of their three pivotal moments.
- Each person should practice telling their own story, using the statues as guideposts to illustrate their own personal timelines.
- Have willing students share their timelines (complete with statues) with the whole group.
- Discussion should follow, focused on how individual moments and choices we are presented with in our lives have the power to shape who we are.
- Ask the students to consider whether or not they think we each have the power to choose the direction our lives take.

## Identity

Prudence: (To Ester) *I am yet to hear you. I cannot wait! I am fascinated to finally meet you. I really, really am!*

When we first encounter the protagonist of *The Convert*, Jekesai, she is about to embark on a journey that will shape her identity. There are many definitions of the word “identity.” In this instance, we are referring to “the state of having unique identifying characteristics held by no other person or thing.”

She has not made a conscious choice to go on this journey. In the beginning of the play, she is teenager attempting to flee an arranged marriage. Loving relatives help Jekesai to succeed in this endeavor, but being saved from this situation leads to another arrangement—she is to work with her aunt for a

local Catholic missionary who will also provide Jekesai an education in the process.

Throughout the course of the story, Jekesai/Ester goes through many life experiences that influence the formation of her identity. Interior and exterior forces are at play:

- In a sincere and conscious way, she fully embraces the teachings of the Catholic religion after Chilford, her catechist, saves her life.
- Jekesai is thrilled with the idea of receiving a formal education and eagerly engages this new process, even learning the Bible better than some of her authority figures in the Church.
- Chilford takes her under his wing and gives her a new name, Ester. This is a reference to a biblical character from the Old Testament (the Hebrew Bible). Referring to the biblical Esther, Chilford says, “She was a woman of great, great courage, saved her people in fact, second only to the Virgin Mary in Holy women in my opinion.”
- Jekesai/Ester constantly finds herself in the position of choosing between the two cultures which influence her life:
  - ◇ The Shona culture from which she came: It contains familiar African ritual and family to which she feels strongly connected, even when such traditions do not always seem to have her best interest at heart as an individual.
  - ◇ The new-to-her culture of Catholicism: Even though it is forced upon the Africans by British colonial powers, it saves Jekesai from an arranged marriage. In addition, she finds true inspiration in the teachings of Jesus Christ.

POST-SHOW WRITING/DISCUSSION PROMPT:

- Name specific events and decisions in *The Convert* that influence who Jekesai/Ester becomes by the end of the play.
- Take a close look at each example you have chosen. Is the source outside of Jekesai’s control, or is the source a decision she has made from within?

The shaping of Jekesai’s identity could be compared to the process a diamond goes through in its formation. Although she is living in world full of heat and pressure, Jekesai transcends this grueling process and, in the end, comes out strong and shining.

- What forces in your life are shaping your identity?
- Name influences with sources both inside and outside of you.
- What metaphor or symbol comes to mind when you think about the shaping of your identity?
- What metaphor or symbol best describes who you are at this moment? What metaphor or symbol do you desire to describe you? What are the similarities and differences between the two?

# Creativity

Comprehension | Connections | Creativity

This section provides opportunities for your students to use theatre to explore and express.

Theatre activities are included that examine both specific artistic aspects of the production, as well as delve deeper into the ideas and questions raised by it. The activities and information in this section can be used both before and after the performance.

## Cultural Mapping

### OBJECTIVES:

- Students will gain knowledge of similarities and differences in their classmates.
- Students will be introduced to *The Convert* and begin to reflect on the play.

### EXERCISE:

Ask the students to move the desks to the side and stand in a circle. Describe the room as a map of the world. Identify Los Angeles in the space. Have students who were born in Los Angeles gather in that place. Have the other students group themselves according to their birthplace (north, east, south, or west of Los Angeles). Each group must determine two additional things that they have in common. Report back to the whole class. (Example: The members of the “north” group all like pizza and are the oldest in their families.)

Repeat activity using other divisions such as:

- Oldest, middle, youngest, only child.
- Speak one language, two languages, etc.
- Quotes from the production:
- (Ask each student to stand by the quote that most intrigues them. Discuss in the group why they chose that quote. What intrigues them about it?)

### THE CONVERT CULTURAL MAPPING QUOTES:

- “Change is a kind of a tricky business my friend.”
- “Who are you? Who are you now?”
- “... singing me over to the ancestors, calling them to receive me.”
- “It is the struggle for freedom.”
- “We continue.”

## Tableau/Frozen Picture

### OBJECTIVES:

- Students will practice using their bodies to communicate an idea or theme.
- Students will reflect on the varied interpretations of the theme.
- Students will reflect on *The Convert* through a physical exploration of its themes.

### EXERCISE:

Divide students into pairs. Student A is the artist. Student B is the statue.

Have student A create a statue out of B on the theme of “the future.”

Examples: Flying cars, world peace, destroying the environment, graduating from college. Statues can be realistic or symbolic, personal or global.

Have each student title their statue and present to the class.

Repeat this exercise with B as the artist and A as the statue.

Repeat with the themes of **Identity, Faith, Family, Tradition, Oppression, Rebellion, and Language.**

Have each student sculpt an image that represents one of these themes.

Discuss what these ideas mean to your students and what these ideas meant to the characters in *The Convert*. Are they similar or very different?

## Colombian Hypnosis Machine: Colonial Power

The characters in *The Convert* exist under a brutal, oppressive colonial regime.

We never see members of the elite ruling class onstage, but we experience the consequences of living under such extreme conditions through the situations and challenges we witness in the story.

This following exercise offers students a physicalization of (or an experiential moment of) living within this power structure.

### COLOMBIAN HYPNOSIS:

- Students pair up.
- Designate A & B.
- Partner A is the first leader.
- Partner A holds up one hand and faces his/her palm toward Partner B.



- Partner B keeps his/her nose about 6 inches from A's hand.
- Leader A moves hand, controlling B's movement. B does his/her best to keep up with A.
- Near the end of this segment, instruct A that there are only ten more seconds left, and to do whatever she/he wants with that knowledge.
- Switch roles.
- Conduct brief discussion about observations and experiences.

COLOMBIAN HYPNOSIS TRIOS:

- One person (who is now the leader) is asked to stand in the middle of a circle of students. The student's arms are outstretched and both hands have palms facing out.
- One person is standing in front of each hand, each person with his/her nose about six inches away from the leader's palms.
- The leader moves both hands, controlling the movement of the other two people.
- The group observes for a time.
- Conduct brief discussion about observations and experiences.

COLOMBIAN HYPNOSIS MACHINE:

- One person stands in the middle of a circle of students with both arms outstretched and palms facing out.
- Two people join, one at each hand, with noses about six inches from the palms of the leader's hands.
- Those two people, in turn, outstretch their arms, with palms facing out.
- Four more people place themselves in front of their hands.
- The machine begins movement, initiated by the person in the center.
- The group observes.
- Conduct discussion about observations and experiences.
- Relate this exercise to *The Convert*.

The effects of living within a colonial power structure can become clearly illustrated through the experiences of the students participating in this exercise. In the final variation:

- The person at the center, in control of all, has plenty of opportunity to remain calm, to focus, and to strategize.
- Those caught in the middle have to follow another's lead AND lead others. They have no time or energy to deal with anyone effectively or humanely.

- Those at the perimeter may be whipped into frenzy while trying desperately to follow the palms of those who are following the main leader. It may become extremely difficult for those at the edges to keep up with the extremely fast-paced and unpredictable motions of the middle members. They have no time to focus and strategize well for themselves.
- Brainstorm alternatives to this kind of centralization of power.
  - ◇ Physicalize the ideas from your brainstorming session.

## KUWOMBERA 1, 2, 3!

A simple game played to get the sounds of the Shona language in our mouths. We also learn about a very common greeting in Zimbabwe.

### INTRODUCTION:

“**Kuwombera**” is a word used to describe hand-clapping. Hand-clapping is used to say ‘Tatenda’ which means ‘Thank you’ in Shona. The Kuwombera hand-clap can also be used to greet someone or acknowledge their presence. It is a sign of respect.

Men and women do the Kuwombera clap differently.

**Men:** Clap long ways with both hands facing each other flat, fingertips and wrists meeting.

**Women:** Clap sideways with both hands cupped and crossed.

We will use the Kuwombera clap later in this game.

### INSTRUCTIONS:

Place students in pairs.

Ask the students to count to 3 with their partner. Each partner says one number. The 1-2-3 pattern continues until the teacher says stop.

For example, the first student says ‘one.’ The second student says ‘two.’ The first student says ‘three.’ The second student says ‘one.’ The first student says ‘two’, etc. This repeats continuously.

After about a minute of letting the pairs try this in English, it’s time to try the same pattern, but this time using the Shona words for the numbers 1-2-3.

They are: **POTSI** (1), **PIRI** (2), **TATU** (3).

Ask the students to repeat the counting exercise with their partner, by counting to 3 in Shona until the teacher says stop.

For the last round of the game, teach the students the Shona word for 'Thank you' which is '**Tatenda.**'

Then, teach the students how to do the 'Kuwombera' clap above in both the masculine and feminine style.

To play the last round of the game, the students will count to 3 in Shona again with their partner.

But this time, when the student says **POTSI** for number 1, the student will also do the women's **Kuwombera** clap.

For number 2, the student still says **PIRI** but with no clap.

For number 3, the student will say **TATU** and do the men's **Kuwombera** clap.

Allow the student pairs to try this for a minute or two.

Then allow another minute or two for a quick discussion of the game.

## MAKIYI! (The key)

A language activity designed to introduce an easy way for students to make three simple sentences in Shona.

### INTRODUCTION:

Shona is a one of the 250 or so Bantu languages that come from Central, Southern and Eastern Africa. When English colonists arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, language experts believe that they forced the Roman Alphabet (which is what we use to spell English) onto the people of Zimbabwe (Rhodesia). Up until then, Shona was mainly spoken, not written.

What's one big difference between English and Shona? Well, in English, we usually separate the parts of a sentence. Objects, verbs, tenses, adverbs, pronouns are often separate words. But in Shona, the verb is used as the root and all other parts of a sentence get added to the verb to create long, long words that look hard to pronounce.

But don't worry! In this activity, you can show your students how words and sentences get formed and how they can be easily pronounced.

### INSTRUCTIONS:

Write the word 'ENDA' on the board. This means 'GO.'

When a verb is used alone, it's a command. A parent may tell a child: Enda!

Now write the word 'KU' on the board. This means 'To/From'.

Q: Who can guess how to say "To Go" in Shona?

A: "KUENDA". [pronounced koo-en-dah]

Write the word "NDIRI" on the board. This means "I am."

Q: Who can guess how to say "I am going."

A: NDIRI KUENDA. [pronounced en-dee-ree koo-en-dah]

That's the basic idea to building sentences in Shona!

Now, let's make 3 simple sentences.

Write these lists on the board:

**PRONOUNS**

NDIRI	I am
TIRI	We are
URI	You are
MURI	You all are
ARI	He/She is
VARI	They are

**VERBS**

ENDA	Go
CHERA	Dig
ONA	Look/See
TAKURA	Carry
FAMBA	Walk
TAURA	Speak
TORA	Bring/Take
TENGA	Buy
GARA	Sit/Stay

**NOUNS**

BADZA	Hoe
BHEGI	Bag
MUSIKA	Market
MIRIWO	Vegetables
BHAZI	Bus
NYIKA	Land, Country, World
REMONI	Lemons
SIPO	Soap

**PREPOSITIONS**

KU	To/From
PA	On, By, Around
MU	In

Ask students to each write 3 simple sentences using the Shona words above. Please encourage them to make mistakes. Part of learning a new language is trying, getting it wrong, and trying again! Request volunteers to share some Shona sentences and ask the class to guess the meaning.

Here are some examples to get started:  
 TIRI KUENDA PABHAZI. (We are going by bus.)  
 VARI FAMBA! (You guys walk!)  
 NDIRI KUTENGA SIPO MUMUSIKA. (I am going to buy soap in the market.)

**Excerpt from the opening of *The Convert***

Mai Tamba: *Kurumidza, Kurumidza! Babamn'ini varikupi?*  
**[Come, come quickly! Where is Uncle?]**

Young Man: *Vaenda kudoroba*  
**[He go towards town center]**

Mai Tamba: *Enda ovachingamidaza! Usamira mira!*  
**[EYYY! GO and meet them as they come! Do something!]**

**Group Tableau**

In *The Convert*, playwright Danai Gurira explores multiple themes, including race, religion, power, oppression, cultural and personal identity, pride, salvation and assimilation. The following lesson plan is designed to explore some of these themes and the feelings and issues the characters (and the actors playing them) must tackle as they bring life to this rich piece of theater.

Introduce students to the term “tableau.” Explain that a tableau is simply a frozen picture. It is often used on stage as a way of telling the story (or a part of it) by capturing a certain physical, facial or metaphorical expression that highlights one or more of the themes from a play.

- Choose a theme dealt with in *The Convert* to use as an example.
- Have a group discussion about the theme and what it entails.
- How might the theme be represented on stage?
- Ask for a student volunteer to “strike a pose” that represents the theme to them (explain that this could be literal or representational/metaphorical).
- Ask the rest of the group to describe what they see (being sure to be respectful of the actors feelings).
- Ask for other students to come and join the first student in order to more fully explore the theme (they may add other people to the picture, strike poses as inanimate objects that create a clearer environment for the audience to observe, or even create something that merely represents an idea).
- Keep adding more elements until the students are satisfied that the tableau clearly represents the theme in which they were interested in depicting.
- Take a final look at the finished tableau and discuss the different elements and what each one represents.

**Note:** This process should be fluid, and discussion and side coaching from the instructor should continue until the final tableau is created. Ideally, every member of the class would join the tableau, but try to at least get 6 volunteers per tableau.

- Now that students have engaged in an example of a tableau and how to create one, split the class into three equal groups, being sure to keep track of which students are in each group (you will need the information later).
- Assign each group one of the following words to consider and create a tableau for:
  - ◇ Oppression
  - ◇ Assimilation
  - ◇ Revolution
- Share each of the tableau

Explain to the group that now that they have had a chance to create together, they will have some time to reflect individually.

## Cover the Space

### PART 1:

- Ask students to simply walk slowly and quietly around the room (cleared of furniture) without interacting with each other, “covering the space.” Students should not talk or touch one another during this time, but rather turn their focus inward, concentrating only on their own breath and what they observe through sight and sound around the room.
- Ask the students to consider what they believe in.
- Ask students to think about a particular group or culture with which they identify.
- When a level of concentration has been achieved, introduce outside elements by asking students to behave in given sets of circumstances:
  - ◇ It is hot/ cold outside.
  - ◇ They are starving/ sleep deprived/ dying of thirst.
  - ◇ It is pitch black outside.
- Now, ask students to turn their attention outward and notice one another. They should not react to each other yet. Instead, they should quietly observe the other people in the room as they walk about the space.
- Ask students to make eye contact with each person they encounter and exchange an unspoken greeting.
- When students have had a chance to greet every person in the room, ask them to consider quietly what they noticed about the people around them.

### PART 2:

- Explain that you will now ask students to adopt certain points of view as they walk about that space. They should take on these points of view or attitudes in the same way that they changed their physicality when environmental changes were introduced.
- Different points of view / attitudes might include:
  - ◇ Suspicious
  - ◇ Curious
  - ◇ Attracted
  - ◇ Condescending
  - ◇ Offended
  - ◇ Sincere

- ◇ Manipulative
- ◇ Helpful
- ◇ Return to neutral

When the group has reached a level of comfort with the work, ask them to use a one word greeting with each person they see. The word can be as simple as “Hello,” but the delivery should represent the given point of view.

## Enemy / Ally

### PART 1:

- Tell students that now they must each secretly choose one person in the room who will represent their sworn enemy (They must do this without telling anyone—especially the chosen person).
- Continuing to walk around the space, now students must stay as far away from their “enemy” as possible, never giving up the identity of the chosen person.
- When this has had a chance to play out for a bit, have the students freeze.

### PART 2:

- Now, students will need to secretly choose their “ally”—someone they can rely on to protect them no matter what the danger.
- The object now is for students to keep their allies between themselves and their enemies at all times—all without saying a word to anyone!
- When the game has been played for a bit, freeze the students again.
- Tell students that they must now switch their enemies to allies and vice versa.
- Let the students begin again, with their new enemies and allies.
- Discuss:
  - ◇ How did that feel?
  - ◇ What was it like to switch enemy for ally and vice versa?
  - ◇ In *The Convert*, the native people are forced to choose between their own people and group of colonists who move in and effectively take over their village. How might this kind of exercise be useful as an actor in this play?

**NOTE:** This exercise should be kept safe and trouble free by asking students to be careful of one another’s feelings.



## Tribe vs. Colonists

- Read the following quote out loud to the class:
- “When a man comes into your house and takes it over, and you are a man—there is no way you can take that lying down!”

### PART 1: YES / NO

- ◇ Divide the class into two groups, and tell one group that they are the colonists while the students in the other group are the native people.
- ◇ Give the colonists a signifying badge of some kind (a plain piece of paper will do)
- ◇ Have students get into pairs made up of one colonist and one native.
- ◇ Explain that in *The Convert*, English colonists approach the Shona people with what they see as a valuable offer—religion and all that they feel goes along with it. The native people are reluctant to buy into the beliefs of these foreign people, and most refuse the offer.
- ◇ With the pairs facing one another, explain each group wants something, but the only words they may use to communicate that desire are “yes” and “no.” Based on what we know about the play, students playing Colonists may only say “Yes” and students playing the Native people may only say “No.”
- ◇ Pairs should engage in a simple call and response at first, with the Colonist saying, “Yes,” and the native answering, “No.”
- ◇ Ask students to experiment with their delivery of their word, thinking about pitch, volume and tempo. Remind them, that they want something.
- ◇ Ask students to try different tactics (not just angry) in order to convince the other person.
- ◇ When students are comfortable, add movement by having students grip the forearm of their partner and rocking back and forth in a sawing motion, being sure to keep it safe

PART 2: STRATEGY

- ◇ Ask the groups to get back together and meet privately to discuss different ways of trying to get what they want.
  - ◇ Each group should then send out scouts to have another round of Yes / No in the common area.
  - ◇ Read the following (Chancellor) quote to the group: “Change is a kind of a tricky business my friend.”
  - ◇ Watch for students who are particularly engaged with the work. Select some who you think may be ready and able to go to the next level of involvement.
  - ◇ Freeze the action and explain that if students playing the native people choose to, they may change sides by switching their word to “Yes”.
  - ◇ Watch to see if any students change sides. If none are willing to change on their own, explain that if the instructor (you) taps someone on the back, that person will change their word to “Yes.”
  - ◇ When a number of students have voluntarily changed sides or been asked to do so, explain that they must move to a third designated part of the room where they will await further instructions. This area is neither part of the Shona Tribe nor part of the Colonists’ area. This new group will be called “Converts.”
- As the groups shift, and the converts find their own area, read the following (Chancellor) quote aloud to the group: *“The white man will never wholly be friend of us of course.”*
  - Ask the students to be aware of how it makes them feel to see one of their own leave their own people. Ask those who changed sides how it felt to leave?
  - As more members of the Shona Tribe shift, explain that their area has just been made smaller.

PART 3: REALITY

- ◇ Ask those students who are still divided to play one more round of Yes / No. While they play, explain that the rules have changed. At this point, explain that you will take away some status from the native people. For example, native people may no longer stand. They must kneel. Native people may not look the colonists in the eye, etc.

- ◇ When there are students in each camp, ask all students to return to the center of the room and make a circle.
- ◇ Ask the entire group to move slowly in a circle, all moving in one direction while always maintaining eye contact with a member of the other group
- ◇ Ask the group to change their movement to be in slow motion and slowly form into their original groups from the first tableau exercise and create their original tableau again and FREEZE when they have it set.
- ◇ Go from tableau to tableau and ask the students in the other groups to relax enough to examine their classmates' work, without totally breaking from their own tableau.
- ◇ For each group, choose particularly expressive members of the class and ask them to share a single word or phrase to describe what they are thinking in character in the tableau.
- ◇ When each of the groups has been highlighted, ask the group to come back together again and shake off the work.
- ◇ Discuss the process and what it was like to be a part of each group.

## Between a Rock and a Hard Place

### WRITING PROMPTS:

In *The Convert*, Jekesai is forced to choose between her family, with all of the customs and beliefs she was brought up, and her new life of religion, education, and what she feels is an empowered existence.

This choice is brought to light painfully when she decides she cannot attend the Kurova Guva ceremony to honor the one year anniversary of her father's death funeral (a ritual used to free the spirit of the dead "so that he can return to the family.") The following is a short scene from the play where Jekesai makes her choice.

Esther: *Christ does not instruct me to abandon my family; my mother, she, she needs me Master.*

Chilford: *She does not! "Let the dead bury the dead and follow me." Who said that?*

Esther: *Jesus*

Chilford: *In the exact! I cannot believe that you are doing like, like all my other converts! How can you think it is that you can function on both of the fence sides? You CANNOT!*

Ask two volunteers to read the scene aloud. Have them or other pairs read the scene as several times so its power and importance are recognized wholly in the room

Ask students to consider the following and write journal entries about their thoughts:

- ◇ What are you proud of?
- ◇ Is there anything in your life that you would give up in order to get something else?
- ◇ What is that thing, what would it take to make you give it up and why would you be willing to do so?
- ◇ What would you never turn your back on?
- ◇ Are there any examples from your own lives of having to choose between two different parts of yourself?
- ◇ How did you choose?
- ◇ Was there any other way to solve the problem?
- ◇ What is worth fighting for?
- ◇ Does religion have the power to change people?
- ◇ What about education, power and money? If so, how?
- ◇ Is it possible to maintain your integrity (keep it real) and still advance your own situation?
- ◇ Do we have options?

CLOSURE:

- Give each student an index card and ask him or her to consider the work they have just participated in.
- Ask students to write two words on their index card:
  - ◇ One word that sums up their feelings about *The Convert* or the work they just did
  - ◇ One word that sums up the way they feel at the moment
- Collect the index cards and shuffle them.
- With students in groups of 6, randomly hand out an even number of cards to each group.
- Ask students to arrange the cards they have been given on the floor in an order that feels right to them. The result is a poem!
- Have each group share their poem aloud.

## Identity and Behavior

The characters surrounding Jekesai/Ester in the story have already made choices regarding identity and behavior:

**Chilford** — He has fully forsaken his former life and has completely embraced the teachings of Roman Catholicism.

**Mai Tamba** — While working in Chilford’s home, she pretends to accept the teachings of Catholicism. In reality, she continues to embrace her culture’s Shona beliefs and rituals, secretly practicing them in Chilford’s home.

**Prudence** — She is the most highly educated character in the play. She is knowledgeable about Biblical stories, but doesn’t fully embrace the Catholicism brought by British colonialists. She identifies with her Shona roots by saying, “I am and will always be a Matebele, a daughter of warriors and proud of my people.” She views herself as having no real authority in society because she is a woman.

**Chancellor** — He is a businessman who feigns adoption of the white man’s religion purely to enable his financial success and upward mobility in society.

Jekesai/Ester is influenced by both worlds and takes what works for her from each. Ultimately, she chooses blood (the blood ties to her family and the shedding of blood to avenge the death of her cousin), but she also seeks absolution from her Catholic mentor. During our last glimpse of her, she is singing a song of her own creation. She tells Chilford, “It is to the Lord my God, in the tongue of my ancestors.” In this moment, she embodies a fusion of her native Shona culture and the teachings of the British colonists’ Catholicism.

### WRITING/DISCUSSION PROMPTS:

By the end of the story do you think that Jekesai is more Shona or more Catholic? Or is she equal parts of each? Explain.

Solicit from students what comes to mind when they hear the words:

- Identity
- Culture
- Catholicism
- Shona
- Colonize
- Indigenous

Offer the following definition of culture:

- Culture - The total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted and reinforced by members of the group.

Now offer the writing/discussion prompts below:

- What type of culture do you come from (ethnic, religious, rural, urban, etc.)?
- What type of culture do you live in right now?
- Compare and contrast the two. How are they the same? How are they different?
- Make a list of ...
  - ◇ What you love from the culture you are from.
  - ◇ What you love from the culture you currently live in.
  - ◇ What you do not like about culture you are from.
  - ◇ What you do not like about the culture you currently live in.

Take a look at the above-listed choices made by the characters in *The Convert*.

- What choices have you made in relation to the cultures in your life?
- How do you weave aspects of both/all cultures into your everyday living?

Is there a culture that you are not from, or that you are not living in, that you admire?

- What do you admire about it?
- What practices or beliefs would you adopt from this culture for your own life? Or have you already done so? Explain.
- Why would a person adopt practices and beliefs from other cultures? Out of desire? Out of necessity? Both? For other reasons? Explain.

During the course of the play, we witness characters behaving in different ways in front of different people.

- When interacting with her boss, Mai Tamba acts as if she is adopting Catholicism. When he leaves the room, she lets her guard down and behaves with more authenticity. When her relatives (her son and niece) are in the room, she also expresses more of her true feelings.
- Prudence is extremely aware of the influence she has among the white colonial ruling class because she is so well spoken. We never see her interact with this group of people, but we can imagine how her voice, movement, and posture might change when she is engaging them.

- Most of the time, when we see Jekesai, she acts with authenticity. Only when she first meets Chilford, and when she is protecting her cousin, Tamba, from death, does she change her behavior in order to influence others.

How do you behave among different people in your life?

Think about how you behave in front of...

Friends  
Parents  
Siblings  
Relatives  
Teachers  
Coaches  
Religious Figures  
School Administrators  
Neighbors

How does your behavior alter when engaging a certain kind of person? How is your behavior consistent with everyone that you encounter?

**ACTING EXERCISE:**

The teacher distributes a handout with the following information (or writes on a white board and asks students to copy on their own sheet of paper):

1. Parent/Guardian:
2. Sibling/Relative:
3. Friend:
4. Teacher:
5. Celebrity:
6. Religious Figure:

Students are to put the name of one specific person in their lives next to each category. (Inform students that these names will be read aloud in class.) They should also include a *brief* description of each person. Details might include:

- Physical characteristics
- Age
- Gender
- Voice

- Personality traits
- Vocation
- Where they are from

PREPARATION FOR IMPROVISATION:

- The teacher asks for one volunteer student actor.
- The student actor gives his/her completed handout to the teacher and enters the stage/playing area.
- The teacher asks for 6 more actors:
  - ◇ These six actors will play the characters on the student actor's list.
  - ◇ They line up to the side of the playing area, offstage.
  - ◇ Before the scene begins:
    - They decide on an order, 1 through 6.
    - The teacher goes to each one of the six actors and quietly reads to her/him the description of his/her character from the student actor's list. For example:
      - Actor #1 is Parent/Guardian, John Green, who is 45 years old, tall and thin, has a very deep voice, and has lots of energy.
      - Actor #2 is Sibling/Relative, Aunt Sarah, who is 74 years old, short and a stout, and is always very cheerful.
      - This gives the actors information about whom they are playing and offers the actors ideas about how to play their characters.
- The teacher assists the audience members in making two decisions for the scene:
  - ◇ Place/environment (a park, living room of a home, restaurant, classroom, desert island, vehicle, etc)
  - ◇ Activity (cleaning the room, making a meal, working out, packing for a trip, driving to a dance, etc.)

THE SCENE BEGINS:

- The student actor begins the improvisation alone onstage, acting out the chosen activity in the designated environment.
- The other six characters enter and exit the scene, one at a time, per the teacher's instructions.



- ◇ To queue the first offstage actor to enter the playing area, the teacher announces the category and name from the list:
  - “Parent/Guardian, John Green, enters the scene...”
  - It is not necessary to read aloud the description of the character. The actor entering the scene will show us some of these qualities through his/her performance.
- The student actor onstage knows exactly who the character entering the scene is (because they have listed the name on his/her sheet), and he/she begins to react to that person’s presence in the environment.
  - ◇ Side coaching (if necessary):
    - Teacher instructs the student actor to imagine that the person from his/her list is truly present in the scene so that he/she, and the audience, gets a clear idea of how the student actor behaves around this person.
    - If students begin to lose focus, ask the actors to go back to the designated activity, or remind them of their environment, to get them centered.
- After a minute or so of engagement by these two actors, the teacher announces:
  - ◇ “John Green exits and Relative, Aunt Sarah, enters the scene. “
- The student actor begins to respond to the new character. (The environment and activity do not change.)
- After going through the entire list of characters, discussion ensues about what the audience members observed and what was experienced by the actor/s.
  - ◇ How did the actor’s behavior change when certain characters entered the room?
  - ◇ How did the actor’s behavior remain the same when engaging certain characters?
  - ◇ Is this behavior consciously chosen, or does it happen without thinking?
  - ◇ The teacher may take the exercise a step further by having more than one character interact with the student actor.
  - ◇ How does his/her behavior change with more than one personality to engage?

MORE DISCUSSION/WRITING PROMPTS:

- How do you see yourself?
- How do you want to be seen by others?
- How is this different from the way you actually behave with others?

Try the above improvisation by behaving the way you see yourself, and/or behaving the way you want others to see you, no matter which character is in the room.

## What's In a Name?

Jekesai means, "to illuminate."

The name Ester is of African and Hebrew origin, meaning, "star."

Prudence is a name from England meaning, "cautious, and intelligent."

Why do you think playwright Danai Gurira chose these names for her characters?

Do you know the meaning of your name?

- Students and teacher share the meanings of their names. If someone in the group does not know, research the answer online or have a name book handy for this exercise.

## Name Dance

### INTRODUCTION:

The following exercises will not only serve as warm-ups, but also as an introduction to specific types of movement. Students will use this information to create their very own movement pieces.

During this opening segment, chart the terms on poster paper, or the white board, to create a reference for students to use when they creating later in the lesson.

### SHAPES:

- The teacher asks the students to do a big stretch, and then he/she says, "FREEZE," when students are most extended.
- Describe what they are doing as a "stretching shape."
- Instruct the students to make other specific shapes, one quality at a time. For example: bending, twisting, curving, crossing, balancing, tilting, open, closed, contained, expanded, symmetrical, asymmetrical.

LEVELS:

- Instruct them to make shapes at different levels (high, medium, low), occasionally returning to neutral.

PATHWAYS:

- Discuss that each of us has a “space bubble” around our body. When we are moving through the space together, our bubbles may bump or brush each other, but our bodies never do.
- Introduce the difference between “axial” and “locomotor” movement.
  - ◇ Axial: stays in one place
  - ◇ Locomotor: travels from one place to another.
- Direct students to walk around the room in different pathways on the floor (straight, curving, zigzag, long, short). They always carry with them the awareness of their space bubbles.
- Encourage them to use the entire room.
- Have the students walk with different qualities (speed, level, tempo and energy).

CREATION OF THE NAME DANCE:

- Students work in small groups of 3 to 5.
- Each group member shares the meaning of his/her name with the small group.
- One at a time, the members spell out their names using their entire bodies. The members observe the student creating his/her name and echo his/her movement, one letter at a time.
- The group uses these movements to create a dance.
  - ◇ Allow approximately 20 minutes to create the dance.
  - ◇ All dance piece must contain:
    - A definite starting position or shape.
    - Movement that uses:
      - All three levels (high, medium, low).
      - Axial and locomotor movement.
      - At least three different types of pathways.
    - A clear ending position or shape.
  - ◇ Put a time limit on the length of the dance if you believe this is helpful to students (1, 2, or 3 minutes).
- Encourage students to use the meanings of their names to create emotion, expression, and energy that inform the movement.

- The teacher should have several musical selections on hand from which the students can choose. Students will not rehearse with music, but will have the music played underneath their performances. Play music from Zimbabwe or spiritual hymns inspired by *The Convert*.

ALTERNATIVE:

Students may create solo dance pieces by utilizing movement that originates from spelling their names with their entire bodies.

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Center Theatre Group's mission is to serve the diverse audiences of Los Angeles by producing and presenting theatre of the highest caliber, by nurturing new artists, by attracting new audiences, and by developing youth outreach and education programs. This mission is based on the belief that the art of theatre is a cultural force with the capacity to transform the lives of individuals and society at large.

### 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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