

# STUDY GUIDE



**Grade Recommendation:** Grades 9 and up

**Created by:** Nitasha Rajoo

**Play Content Advisory:**

Explores mature themes

Contains coarse and strong language

Deals with issues of oppression, including racism

**PRAIRIE THEATRE EXCHANGE**

## A father's love letter to his daughters

Ismaila Alfa is a journalist, a current-affairs radio host and a hip-hop artist who was born in Nigeria but grew up and made his home in Winnipeg. Last spring, while in Toronto for a job interview and physically separated from all his kids, two events changed the world. The pandemic exposed so many things that to some had been below the surface, but for others, like Ismaila, had always been much too obvious. The murder of George Floyd and the ensuing global calls for social justice spurred a need to help his daughters understand the world - about race, about culture, about home. So he wrote his first play - a heartfelt, raw blend of powerful prose and poetry with the rhythm of hip hop - to use his voice to help his daughters find theirs.

A WORLD PREMIERE

### CHARACTERS:

Narrator - Ismaila Alfa

Father - Ray Strachan

Daughter - Melissa Langdon

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### THEMES / MOTIFS:

- Change
- Identity & Origin
- Race
- Voice
- Father / Daughter relationships
- Culture & Nationality
- Geography
- Fear vs Hope
- Past vs Present



## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT Ismaila Alfa

After university, Ismaila Alfa started touring heavily across Canada and the US with his rap group Frëk Shō. Together the group released "Patience", the first music video by a Winnipeg rap group to go into rotation on MuchMusic. Eventually he started his own group Magnum KI - a group that would go on to play the Vans Warped tour, a first for any Manitoba rapper.

As his music career developed, Ismaila felt a need to grow his story-telling and after completing a diploma in broadcast journalism, worked his way into CBC Manitoba. Here he continued to tell people's stories but, from a different stage. He still focused on lifting the voices of communities that are underrepresented in media and holding decision makers accountable.

But above his passion for story-telling, journalism and music, he is a Dad and his path through music, broadcasting and parenting has led to his first play, *VOICE*. It's a story that evolved with the news cycle as he was writing. *VOICE* uses Ismaila's spoken word to explore the thoughts and emotions of a father as he navigates trying to be a good Dad while moving to a city far from his kids, the murder of George Floyd and the uprising that followed, and the pandemic.

# AN INTERVIEW WITH THE PLAYWRIGHT

**1. In light of the world, we are living in, this may seem obvious, but what inspired you to write *VOICE*?**

I was inspired by my love for my kids and a belief that being a father is the most important job I have in life. I was motivated by the fact that their knowledge base is quickly catching up to mine and I feel like less of an expert so...am I really equipped to prepare them for life as an adult? These fears and questions inspired me.

**2. How did you approach the construction and episodic nature of the text? Did you know you wanted to include spoken word, hip hop and music into the foundation of the play?**

I worked with director Thomas Morgan Jones very closely on the writing. He would provide writing prompts for me and I would write poetry, rap or spoken word based on what felt right for the delivery of that message or that part of the story.

**3. What was the decision behind the naming of the play?**

I'm terrible at naming projects so Thom and I started brainstorming one-word titles because we knew we wanted to keep it simple. We decided on *VOICE* because the story is about using my voice to help my kids learn to use their own voices. My voice is also heard as the narrator AND all of the music is made from my voice. It is simple yet layered and really embodies the project.

**4. Who do you believe this play is for?**

I believe this play is for any parent or child. It's actually for literally anyone who has lived through this pandemic.

**5. *VOICE* has a tagline of, "A father's love letter to his daughters". What insights do you hope the audience will come away with from the relationship between fathers and daughters?**

I hope that they see that their dad's not perfect and I don't have it all figured out and maybe that's part of what I am supposed to teach them. You're never done learning but you DO know right from wrong. Use that building block to figure everything else out.

**6. Not only are you the playwright, but you play a significant role in the performance. Was this always intended? Did you have any new discoveries as a performer into the world of the play?**

Initially I was supposed to be the main actor in the play but while writing it, I got a new job in Toronto and we had to change plans. When we decided to find two brilliant actors to play the father and child, the project evolved into something I feel was even more moving than initially planned. I learned a lot about what I had written when it came out on stage from the actors. It taught me a lot about myself and how I see myself as a father and how I think my kids see me. It taught me about how little movements of the body add to the message.

**7. Do you have a favourite line or moment in the play? If so, can you share?**

My very favourite moment in the play is towards the end when Melissa (plays the daughter) delivers a rap verse in her own voice. It feels like her becoming more accepting of her relationship with her father and showing that, even in his missteps, she has learned a lot about being a good and strong person from him. It gives me hope!

**8. This is a very personal and raw exposition of a fathers love for his daughters. What have been your daughters' reactions to the play?**

It has started many conversations with all three of my kids. They range from 11 - 25 years old, so their reactions range as well. Mostly it had them asking why I would question whether I know enough to be a good Dad!



## AN INTERVIEW WITH THE DIRECTOR Cherissa Richards

### 1. What excited you about directing *VOICE*?

What excited me the most about directing *VOICE*, was that I got to direct a show with a local Black playwright, local Black actors and a sound designer of colour. It's rare that people of colour get a chance to create theatre on our main stage theatres and working with this team of talented artists of colour was a rare honour, one that I hope will start happening more frequently.

### 2. You directed this piece during the pandemic and in a time of physical distancing. Did this impact the choices you made as a director?

The pandemic definitely affected how we worked on this show. The actors had to perform 6 feet apart, very stringent COVID protocols were in place while we worked, and our health and safety was top of mind throughout the entire rehearsal and filming process.

### 3. Can you describe the father in 3 adjectives? The daughter?

Father: Artistic, Passionate, Loving.

Daughter: Curious, Hurt, Passionate.

### 4. How does symbolism (i.e set, props, movement) play a part in the performance and the father/ daughter relationship?

Symbolism plays a big part in the play. The Voice of the Narrator symbolizes the voice of the father, and the actor who plays the Father character is a representation of that voice. The Daughter character is a symbol, because she is a composite or a representation of a combination of all three of the playwright's actual daughters. The two characters we see are symbols of the playwright's family and represent the love he has for his family. The characters also symbolize the playwright's relationship with his own parents.

The two circle platforms that the actors perform on represent symbols of the physical distance and emotional distance separating the father and the daughter. The circular platforms are also symbolic of earth (and are inspired from the skins of a Nigerian drum): The father's platform is darker and has more colour to it which represents or symbolizes the fact that he has traveled more time, had more experiences in life, while the daughter's platform is lighter and less defined,

which represents that she is younger and has more life yet to experience along her journey. The crates filled with books and the props the daughter finds represent the father's life/ lived experiences/his inner most thoughts and dreams and she discovers more about her father by reading through the books and discovering the objects.

*Symbolism: A symbol is something which stands for or represents something else. Symbols are often used in drama to deepen its meaning and remind the audience of the themes or issues it is discussing. A prop often has a particular significance that an audience will instantly recognise when used symbolically in the work. (BBC Bitesize)*

### 5. Hip Hop, rhythm and rhyme, and spoken word are interwoven into the fabric of the production. How did this contribute to the overall theme or vision you had?

Hip Hop, rhythm and rhyme, and spoken word are the written elements in the playwright's work and so they are the foundation of the play and we used that to create the world for the actors to explore. Kind of like the heartbeat of the piece.

### 6. What 'Voice' do you wish for young audiences to come away with after watching this performance?

Just as the daughter is inspired to find her "voice", I hope that audiences are inspired to discover their own voice and speak their own truths from watching this show.

### 7. When people come to see it, how do you want them to feel during the play? What questions do you want them to ask themselves afterward?

Theatre is subjective, meaning, every person can take away something different from the experience of watching a play and it is up to the audience to take what they will from that experience and hopefully they are inspired from the message, the images of the play and the feelings the play evokes within them. Perhaps *VOICE* can inspire the audience to think of their own relationship with their family and it speaks the "Black experience" and the BLM movement happening in our world today. What is your part to play in all of that?

## PRE SHOW DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### 1. What is your voice?

A person's voice provides lots of information, such as their age and where they are from. From a practical perspective, performers need to ensure that their voice is clear so the audience can hear what they are saying. A performer should ensure that they have good articulation and projection. A well-trained performer should be able to project their voice so they are loud and clear. Performers also use a range of vocal skills to convey the subtext of a line. Vocal skills include:

- accent
- emphasis
- pace and rhythm
- pause
- volume
- quality
- resonance
- tone
- pitch

### 2. What are the responsibilities and role of a father?

### 3. What is the role of a daughter?

### 4. The playwright is Nigerian-born. Can you find three positive and significant contributions that originated from Nigeria?

### 5. Do you know who Rodney King is?

### 6. As a student today, how do you view race in Canada?

### 7. Have you ever felt like your voice was not heard? Explain.

### 8. What is the best advice you ever received? Why?

### 9. How would you explain law and order to someone?

### 10. How do you define fairness?

## POST-SHOW DISCUSSIONS, EXERCISES & ACTIVITIES

### 1. What did you discover about the relationship between Father and Daughter?

### 2. What did the performance allow you to feel? Or realize?

### 3. What do you believe the key message or theme is from watching the production?

### 4. Did the lyrical elements (rap/ beat box/ spoken word) affect your connection to the piece? Why or why not?

**Spoken Word:** A broad designation for poetry intended for performance. Though some spoken word poetry may also be published on the page, the genre has its roots in oral traditions and performance. Spoken word can encompass or contain elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music. Characterized by rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play, spoken word poems frequently refer to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community. (Poetry Foundation)

### 5. What does empowering your own voice mean to you?

### 6. What kind of woman do you think the daughter will grow up to be?

### 7. What is the significance and symbolism of the two circle platforms?

### 8. "This pandemic exposes so many holes...

*First the healthcare system,*

*Then the education system,*

*Then the long-term care system*

*Then something that affects the way ALL the systems work...RACISM."*

*(excerpt from VOICE)*

What other systems were 'exposed' during the pandemic?

### 9. Is there a difference between the law and justice?

### 10. What is your voice?

# WARM UP

## 'WHAT IF' EXERCISE

**Instructions:** Have students move around in the space on their own. As the teacher, call out the following 'What Ifs' and allow the students the opportunity to allow their physicality to represent the scenario you offer. This involves the student putting them into the character's shoes within a certain scenario and asking the question 'how would I react if this happened to me?' Students should be silent and moving in the space. You may want to consider playing atmospheric music in the background to set the mood.

### What IF...

1. You were never noticed?
2. You were given really good advice from a parent/elder in your family?
3. You spent a lot of time on your phone?
4. You liked to write?
5. You were lost?
6. You were living in a new country where you don't know the language?
7. You were on your own and separated from your family?
8. You did not fit in because you were...different.
9. You felt like you were dying?
10. You had to be the provider?

**Extension:** You might wish to **thought-track** certain students during this activity. Have students freeze, and as the teacher you can call out their name. They then unfreeze and thought-track. When they finish, the students freeze. Repeat this so that multiple students get a chance to thought-track.

***Thought-track:** A thought-track is when a character steps out of a scene to address the audience about how they're feeling. Sharing thoughts in this way provides deeper insight into the character for an audience. In rehearsal, it's an effective way of exploring characters and scenes in greater depth. Stopping the action and sharing thoughts enables the actor to fully understand how their character thinks or feels at any given moment. Sometimes the character might feel something different than the words they're speaking.*

### Debrief Questions

1. Which 'What If' did you connect with as a performer?  
As an observer?
2. What did your characters want for any of the What Ifs, how did your body personify this?
3. What was at stake?
4. What did you notice about the characters vocal qualities when they shared a thought-track line?
5. Did you observe any particular behaviour that stood out?

# ACTIVITY ONE

**Instructions:** Put students into groups of three or four. Print off the following quotes and give one quote to each group. Each group will create a **still image** (also known as a tableau) based on the quote and their own interpretation. Before they create the image have them consider:

- **What does their line mean?**
- **What is at stake?**
- **What is the message they wish to convey?**

- "Time heals" is more than a cliché - it is a bold-faced lie.
- Knowing that you're being turned down for places to live or jobs because they saw that you are Black before they saw your qualifications.
- I'm RICH with race.
- A man wears his family name like it was jewellery.
- Home is where you go when you feel your worst... safe enough to breakdown because you know you'll be built back up.
- A house is built of wooden beams, a home is built of love and dreams.
- The phobia of a dark globe lives on in the nature of humans.
- My child is the future so I teach her.
- Dads have things under control. Dads don't give up and they don't cry right? Well, I feel like crying.
- In life I want you to feed your ghost, nourish your spirit.

**Still Image:** This is a frozen picture which communicates meaning. It can provide insight into character relationships with a clear focus upon use of space, levels, body language and facial expression. Students are encouraged to exaggerate their body gestures and facial expressions. Remember, there is no talking in a still image!

**Extension:** You might choose one person to step out of the image to read the quote to the audience.

**Alternative:** Consider getting your students to edit the line down to one word - what would they choose?

**Debrief Questions:**

1. **What did you discover about the images?**
2. **Were there any images that you could link together? Why?**
3. **Which quote were you drawn to? Why?**
4. **What was your impression of the father based on this exercise?**

# ACTIVITY TWO

## HOT-SEATING - GETTING TO KNOW THE DAUGHTER

**Instructions:** We learn a lot about the father and the wise words of wisdom he offers his daughter. But what do we know about the daughter? Put your journalist hat on - come up with at least 10 questions you would like to ask the daughter.

Hot-Seating questions can be as simple or as complex as you wish. However, remember they should be rooted in the understanding of the play.

Question Examples:

1. How old are you?
2. What kind of phone do you have?
3. Have you travelled to other parts of Canada? Abroad?
4. What do you want to be when you grow up?
5. When you think of your father, what five words come to mind?
6. What do you do for fun in Manitoba?
7. What do you feel about race and your family?

**Hot Seating:** This is an exercise to deepen understanding of character. An actor sits in the hot-seat and is questioned in role, spontaneously answering questions they may not have considered before. Hot-seating helps an actor become more familiar with their role. The questioners should also act as observers, as feedback can be very useful. Ask questions that force the actor to consider the life of their character in depth and beyond the world of the play. You could ask them about home life, childhood, family relationships, hopes, fears, hobbies and how they feel about other characters. Make a note of any mannerisms that emerge which can be incorporated into performance, such as twisting hands out of nervousness or speaking slowly with a serious tone of voice and fixed eye contact. If something works for the character you are playing, keep it.

# ACTIVITY THREE THE LETTER

This time my girls have been calling me each day to check in, but one afternoon I get a call from my middle daughter and she's crying uncontrollably.

I ask, "What's wrong babe?"

She says, "I have been reading about what happened to George Floyd and saw the video and...I'm scared for you Papi. You're a Black man, what if the cops pull you over...that could happen to you."

I said to her, "You don't worry, babe. I've been Black for 44 years and I've lived up until now. I take good care of myself and I will make sure that I'm around for a long time. So don't be scared for me. I'll be okay."

Then I silently wished to myself that I had sounded convincing to her because I wasn't so sure about what I told her. I hope I'll be fine, but truth is... it wouldn't surprise me if I wasn't."

(excerpt from VOICE)

**Question:** Have you ever felt scared for yourself or your family due to something going on in the world?

**Instructions:** Write a letter to yourself or to a specific person in response to the question.

1. What message do you want to convey?
2. Why do you feel the way you do?
3. What emotive language will you use?
4. What action would you like the person receiving your letter to do?



# ACTIVITY FOUR SOUND THE SIRENS - SPOKEN WORD

**Instructions:** Give a copy of the following excerpt from *VOICE* to every student. Have students read as a class and have an opportunity to discuss. When students read, allow them to consider using a variety of vocal techniques such as pause, pace, intonation, inflection and stress.

**Spoken Word:** A broad designation for poetry intended for performance. Though some spoken word poetry may also be published on the page, the genre has its roots in oral traditions and performance. Spoken word can encompass or contain elements of rap, hip-hop, storytelling, theater, and jazz, rock, blues, and folk music. Characterized by rhyme, repetition, improvisation, and word play, spoken word poems frequently refer to issues of social justice, politics, race, and community. (Poetry Foundation)

*Overlords just laugh, watching hunger starve the underdogs  
No wonder odds were always in their favour from the start  
My people runnin' hard, twice the work for half the pay  
So they can have some more tomorrow than they have today  
Pride of a lion but they caged in  
Watchin' their babies slippin' through the cracks in the pavement  
There's too much at risk if we don't get the picture  
The rich get richer the poor just get sicker  
Lord knows it's grind all the time from the bottom of the mixture  
Tryin' to climb through the crabs in the bucket, the fit will survive  
To jump out the fryin' pan and into the fire  
Why are...my people dyin'? Man, the proof's in the images  
They keep denying and the truth's in the privileges  
Devil's in the details and he's who controls them  
Leading all the sheep is a wolf in a man's clothin'*

(excerpt from *VOICE*)

## Leading Questions

1. What poetic devices are being used?
2. What imagery is illustrated in this excerpt?
3. What other literacy techniques are being utilized?
4. What moments stand out?
5. What is the key message?
  - If you had to edit both speeches down to 10 lines, what would they be? Five lines? One line?
  - Be prepared to justify why you chose these lines.

**Extension:** Students can turn their letter from Activity Three into spoken word

## Examples of Spoken Word:

[Ted Talk - If I should have a daughter ... | Sarah Kay](#)

[Amanda Gorman: The Hill We Climb](#)

[Kate Tempest - What We Came After](#)

# ACTIVITY FIVE WHAT IS YOUR IDENTITY?

**Identity:** Who a person is, or the qualities of a person or group that make them different from others.

*"Our identity isn't who made us, it's what we have made of ourselves...with their guidance. I had an identity thrust upon me before I was even old enough to need ID."*

(excerpt from *VOICE*)

**Instructions:** Students will create a collage that showcases the following attributes:

1. Who are you?
2. Where are you from?
3. What inspires you?
4. What are your goals and aspirations?
5. How do you view the world?
6. What makes you YOU?

**Materials:** Paper, Magazines, Scissors, Glue, Coloured Pencils/Markers. Students might need to bring in pictures from home, compliments from others, etc.

## On your collage you should include:

- Picture of yourself (photo or drawn picture), family and / or friends.
- Find words or pictures that represent at least 10 traits (physical, emotional, mental, social) that you love about yourself.
- Gather at least three - five pieces of advice or words of wisdom from other people. You must include at least one compliment from a friend, parent/trusted adult, and teacher.
- Add additional images, pictures, to design your collage.

## FURTHER RESOURCES

### Definitions

<https://theantioppressionnetwork.com/resources/terminologies-of-oppression/>

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### Rodney King riots

<https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/riots-erupt-in-los-angeles>

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### The Pervasive Reality of Anti-Black Racism in Canada

<https://www.bcg.com/en-ca/publications/2020/reality-of-anti-black-racism-in-canada>

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### 365 days to honour Black Canadians:

<https://www.etfo.ca/SupportingMembers/Resources/Pages/BlackCanadianCal.aspx>

<https://bcblackhistory.ca/>

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### Police Brutality in Canada:

#### A Symptom of Structural Racism and Colonial Violence

<https://yellowheadinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/k-stelkia-police-brutality-in-canada-yi-brief.pdf>

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### Be an Upstander

<https://humanrights.ca/upstander/#/>

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### Emancipation Day in Canada

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/emancipation-day-celebrations-canada-1.6124826>

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### BBC Bitesize

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize>

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## MANITOBA CURRICULUM:

### Diversity Education

#### Black History and Anti-racism in Canada

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/multic/bhm.html>

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## SOCIAL STUDIES:

### Grade 10

[https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/overviews/grade10\\_american\\_hist.pdf](https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/overviews/grade10_american_hist.pdf)

### Grade 12

#### Global Issues: Citizenship and Sustainability

[https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/global\\_issues/social.pdf](https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/global_issues/social.pdf)

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### World Geography - a Human Perspective

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/socstud/overviews/senior4-worldgeo.pdf>

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### English Language Arts

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/ela/index.html>

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### Drama

<https://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/k12/cur/arts/drama/index.html>