



A Black Theatre Workshop Study Guide

DIGGERS

By Donna-Michelle St. Bernard

**2024 World Premiere Co-Produced by Black Theatre
Workshop and Prairie Theatre Exchange**

FROM THE PAGE...

- **2021:** Black Theatre Workshop and Prairie Theatre Exchange commission Donna-Michelle St. Bernard to write the next piece in her 54-ology.
- **April 2022:** Black Theatre Workshop, as part of the Co-Curating Company in Residence program with the NAC, curates a workshop of *Diggers* for the NAC 2021-2022 season. *Diggers* is workshopped as part of "Black is the New Black" development lab with a presentation of a scene from the show.
- **March 2023:** After the development lab and dramaturgy work with Yvette Nolan and Thomas Morgan Jones, Donna-Michelle creates a new version of the *Diggers* script.
- **May 2023:** A reading of the latest *Diggers* script is held for the playwright to explore the story and character dynamics further.
- **August 2023:** *Diggers* is workshopped with the directing team – Pulga Muchochoma and Lydie Dubuisson – to explore the role of movement in the show.
- **December 2023:** The directing team and designers draft what will become the production designs for the world premiere of *Diggers*. Donna-Michelle finishes the final version of the script.
- **February 1, 2024:** The world premiere of *Diggers*!

...TO THE STAGE!

For over a decade, playwright Donna-Michelle St. Bernard has been on a mission to write a play about or inspired by each country in Africa. This 54-ology project has led to Black Theatre Workshop and Prairie Theatre Exchange having the pleasure of commissioning, producing, and presenting the latest installment –

DIGGERS

Fresh out of high school, Bai is dreaming of all the opportunities the world has to offer. However, as a sickness in town begins spreading uncontrollably, he's recruited to join his uncle, Solomon, and Abdul as a gravedigger.

Bai is anxious to get back to his life, but the experienced gravediggers know that they're in this for the long haul. Abdul and Solomon introduce Bai to the intricacies and dignity of their work – after all they're essential to keeping the town safe. The trio find their own ways to deal with their situation, building their own hope out of the tragedy that surrounds them. But as the three diggers face graverobbers, dwindling supplies, and isolation, can they keep their hard-won hope alive?

Inspired the recent Ebola epidemic in Sierra Leone, *Diggers* is a tribute to essential workers and a reflection on how even in the worst of circumstances, humanity will find a way to push our dreams to the surface and launch our search for peace. Full of song, movement, laughter, and tears, *Diggers* invites the audience to choose where their hope resides.

THE CHARACTERS

CHANCE JONES as **ABDUL** – “mid” – One of the original gravediggers. Skilled and focused on the task at hand, he has less patience for Bai's naivety about their situation than Solomon. **ABDUL** has a dry sense of humor and can appear uncaring, but he feels deeply for those close to him.

CHRISTIAN PAUL as **SOLOMON** – “lifer” – One of the original gravediggers. Dedicated to the work, **SOLOMON** kindly introduces Bai to the routine of life on the hill. He is patient with the others, even as circumstances get hard.

JAHLANI GILBERT KNORREN as **BAI** – “noob” – A young recruit. Initially reluctant to do the job, **BAI** chooses to focus on the future and what lies ahead. His youth and inexperience causes friction with the others, but he ultimately learns how essential the “diggers” are.

WARONA SETSHWAELO as **SHEILA** – “a Sheila” – A member of town council. **SHEILA** has tasked herself with bringing supplies to the three diggers. She is witty, resolved, and devoted to her community.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Donna-Michelle St. Bernard aka Belladonna the Blest is an emcee, playwright and agitator. Her main body of work, the 54ology, includes: *The First Stone*, *Cake*, *Sound of the Beast*, *A Man A Fish*, *Dark Love*, *Roominhouse*, *Salome's Clothes*, *Gas Girls*, *Give It Up*, *The Smell of Horses*, and *Diggers*. Commissioned works include: *Reaching For Starlight* (Geordie Theatre), *Say the Words* (Wrecking Ball), *The House You Build* (GTNT). Opera libretti include: *Forbidden* (Afarin Mansouri/Tapestry Opera), *Oubliette* and *Nucleosynthesis* (Ivan Barbotin/Tapestry Opera).



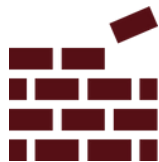
DM has collaborated on the creation of *The Only Good Indian* with Jivesh Parasram and Tom Arthur Davis, *Hope Is A Story* with Sunny Drake, *They Say He Fell* with Nir Bareket and *501: Toronto in Transit* with Justin Manyfingers and Bob Naismith. She is co-editor with Yvette Nolan of the Playwrights Canada Press anthologies *Refractions: Solo* and *Refractions: Scenes*, as well as editor of *Indian Act: Residential School Plays*. DM is currently the associate artist at lemonTree Creations, and artistic director of New Harlem Productions.

STORY SIGNPOSTS

Throughout the *Diggers* script, Donna-Michelle “wrote” in the repeating story motifs using the icons below as “signposts”. They indicated significant moments where the motif either existed in dialogue or was meant to be represented on stage.



TINY TOWN



WALL



DIGGING



RAIN



DOG

During the production process, the directing team and designers interpreted these motifs through set, movement, props, sound, and lighting.

THE DIRECTOR



PULGA MUCHOCHOMA is a dancer, choreographer, creator and founder of Pulga Dance. He was born in Mozambique. His dance career and training began in Quelimane with Montes Namuli Dance Company. In 2006, he came to Toronto with the company for the International AIDS Conference. With Montes Namuli/Shakespeare Link Canada, he performed in several shows in venues in Toronto and Mozambique. When Montes Namuli returned to Mozambique, Muchochoma stayed in Toronto to study at the School of Toronto Dance Theatre. In 2009 he joined the company Toronto Dance Theatre where he danced for 11 seasons under the leadership of Christopher House. With TDT, Pulga worked with many local and international artists, and he also participated in the 2015 Opening ceremony of the Toronto Panam Games, with Cirque du Soleil and NBS.

THE ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR



LYDIE DUBUISSON is a stage director, playwright, curator and dramaturg from Tiohtià:ke/ Montreal. Her work examines intersectionality, dystopian reality, collective memory and multilingual creative processes. Over the years, she directed projects with Just For Laughs, Collectif Potomitan, Imago Theatre and Teesri Duniya Theatre. Dubuisson wrote *Quiet/Silence*, *Sanctuary/Sanctuaire*, and she co-wrote *Blackout: The Concordia Computer Riot* which is published by Playwrights Canada Press. She is currently writing a new play commissioned by Théâtre Tableau d'Hôte. Lydie Dubuisson had her Stratford Festival debut in 2023, as a script consultant. Dubuisson was Artistic Associate at Black Theatre Workshop (2020-23). She is a curator with the Arrival Legacy Project. She graduated with distinctions from Concordia University's Theatre Program.

THE CAST



CHANCE JONES is a John Abbott Professional Theatre Alumni. He signed with DaVinci Talent after graduating. Quickly booked various roles walk on speaking roles on television series and movies such as: *Transplant*, *Wong and Winchester*, *The Bold Type*, *Best Sellers*. Became the Voice for Dr. Pepper commercials, featured in various Commercials: Ruffles, Moslen, Lotto 6/49. Despite all the multi-media exposure, theatre is where Chance began his acting journey. Working with Black Theatre Workshop has always been a goal of his, and for this to be his first professional theatre debut is a dream come true.

THE CAST



CHRISTIAN PAUL has been performing in Theatre, TV and Film for over 25 years. He is excited to be back at BTW for *Diggers*. His last theatre credits include *She Said/He Said* and *The Meeting* where he played Dr. Martin Luther King. You can catch him on a French TV series called *Avant Le Crash*. He is currently finishing his short film *Maljo* to be released in 2024.



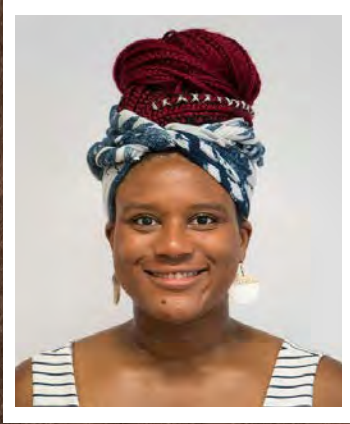
From 17 years dedication to football, to a random theatre class taught by an inspiring professor, to graduating from Concordia University with a Major in Theatre, **JAHLANI**'s path is just getting started in the arts. Suggested for his first role by local theatre director/professor, Liz Valdez, Jahlan landed his first role in Tableau D'Hôte Theatre's *Blackout* co-directed by Tamara Brown and Mathieu Perron and choreographed by Rodney Diverlus. Jahlan is excited to return to the stage after a two-year hiatus during the pandemic.



WARONA SETSHWAELO (she/her) is a Tio'tia:ke (Montreal) based artist, with Tswana and Zulu roots. She moved to North America 16 years ago to pursue her career. Thus far she has been fortunate enough to have worked in TV; shows such as *The Disappearance*, *19-2* and *Quantico*, some of her film credits include *Death Wish*, *On the Basis of Sex* and *White House Down* and video games; *Assassin's Creed Origins*, *Valhalla*, *Tom Clancy's Ghost Recon* and most recently *Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora*. Her first love, the stage, still featured prominently in her life and has formed healthy relationships

with theatre companies across Canada, such as *Imago*, *Centaur*, *Segal Centre*, *Teesri Duniya*, *RMTC*, *The Belfry*, *Tarragon*, *Repercussion* and *Scapegoat Carnivale*. Warona is a mother and activist and is so excited to finally work with Donna-Michelle St. Bernard, a Canadian icon.

COURTNEY MOSES



SET DESIGN

GEORGES MICHAEL FANFAN



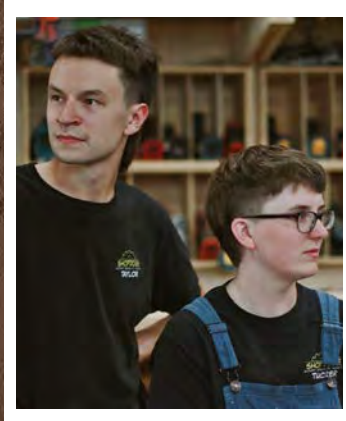
COSTUME DESIGN

TIM RODRIGUEZ



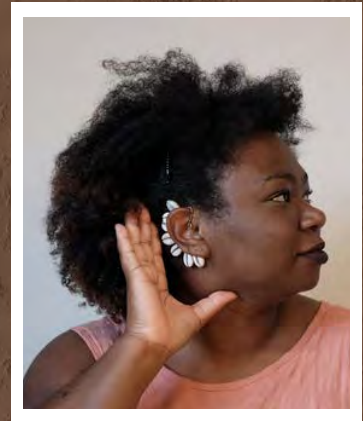
LIGHTING DESIGN

SHOPDOGS



**PRODUCTION MANAGER
TECHNICAL DIRECTOR**

ELENA STOODLEY



SOUND DESIGN

ELYSE QUESNEL



STAGE MANAGER

CATHERINE SARGENT



APPRENTICE STAGE MANAGER

HOW EPIDEMICS CHANGE SOCIETY

Throughout history, epidemics have been major catalysts towards social change, for better and for worse.

In the mid-14th century, the Black Death, or the bubonic plague pandemic, raged across Europe, Asia, and North Africa. The high fatality rate of the plague led to great loss of human life and as the pandemic went on, labour shortages began to affect many Western European nations. In the waning years of the pandemic, as labour shortages continued, workers seized this opportunity to demand better wages and working conditions. This movement hallmarked the end of serfdom in much of Western Europe, ending the inequitable system of feudal relationships.

While epidemics have led to improvement in working standards, infrastructure, and technology, they are also often followed by increased discrimination and oppression. In 1901, Cape Town, South Africa faced its own bubonic plague epidemic. Black people in the city, already facing discrimination and disenfranchisement, were subjected to quarantines based on race and segregated from white settlers. These quarantines served as inspiration for the segregated apartheid communities later implemented in South Africa.

The treatment the Black community of Cape Town faced was based on historical oppression, with the epidemic serving as a catalyst that people took advantage of to justify escalating persecution. While epidemics can be an opportunity for humanity to prove its ingenuity and passion for building a better world, they can just as easily become opportunities to create and enforce systems of oppression. As society continues to grapple with the most recent pandemic we've faced, we have the opportunity to turn our eyes towards what social changes we can make and ensure they're for the better.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What changes to the town and their way of life happen over the course of the play?
2. How does the diggers' sense of identity as "part of the community" change over the course of the play?
3. Once the epidemic is over, what changes do you see the characters implementing in their lives? What changes do you see the town implementing?
4. Have your answers been influenced by your experience of living through an pandemic over the past few years? How so?

RESOURCES

["Past pandemics redistributed income between the rich and poor, according to Stanford historian"](#)
[by Melissa De Witte](#)

["How do pandemics change us?"](#)
[by Gita Pai and Penelope Hardy](#)

["How Pandemics Shape Society"](#)
[Interview with Alexandre White](#)

INTER-GENERATIONAL RELATIONS

Throughout *Diggers*, intergenerational relationships feature as a source of tension between the characters.

Though their exact ages aren't revealed in the play, Bai has just finished high school, Solomon is old enough to be his uncle and Abdul is old enough to still see Bai as a child. These age gaps and the difference in perspective the characters have as a result leads to conflict between them in the play.

Abdul and Solomon often feel as if Bai is too naïve and focused on dreaming about the future to do the work properly. Bai repeatedly struggles with the two older men's sense of defeat and resistance to new ideas. However, by the end of *Diggers*, Abdul, Solomon, and Bai have united for a shared goal – to keep their town safe – with each of their perspectives and approaches being essential to that mission.

As different as people can be because of their age and experience, they can be just as different because of where they were born, how they grew up, and what kind of opportunities they've had. In fact, recently the idea of generational differences has been thrown into question. The differences between older people and younger people today seem to be the same as they always have – openness to new ideas vs comfort with familiar ways – and within each group are people who think differently from "their generation". While "generational differences" may not be real, exploring them through stories can help us reflect on the potential tensions and opportunities of intergenerational collaboration.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Whose perspective in the show did you relate to? In what ways?
2. What attitudes towards life do you think are different/the same in your generation compared to the previous generation? What do you think caused them to change/remain the same?
3. What elements of today's "generational discourses" do you see in the way the characters interact with each other?
4. What factors aside from generational differences do you think have contributed to these characters' perspectives on their situation?

RESOURCES

["Solving today's wicked problems with intergenerational power"](#)
[Raccords Podcast with Guest Marc Freedman](#)

["It's Time to Stop Talking About 'Generations'" By Louis Menand](#)

["The big idea: why the generation gap isn't as wide as you think" by Bob Duffy](#)

BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH ART

In times of crisis, art can be an essential tool for expression and building community.

The idea of art as a method of expression and community building has a long history in the Black diaspora. From the Harlem Renaissance to the Black Arts Movement, music, writing, visual art, and theatre expressed the realities of Black life and the future Black communities were hoping to build. Black Theatre Workshop was one of the many arts organizations formed around the Black Arts Movement (1965–1975) with the goal of creating space for Black artists to celebrate and add to Black culture. The collectives and movements that formed during this time continue to connect and shape Black communities today.

In *Diggers*, the gravediggers endure a long and difficult situation through creativity and ritual. As Bai, Abdul, and Solomon become more isolated, their artistic practices help fill their need for belonging and meaning. While this can be read as an homage to the legacy of art as community building in the Black diaspora, it can also be read as a reflection on the way art brought people together over the pandemic.

During the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, many people experienced long-term isolation and distress. In response, people across the world created stories, images, dance, and music about what they were going through and the impact it had on their lives. Creating art not only helped people process their emotions about what was going on, but it also connected them to others in a time of isolation. As we move forward in the wake of the pandemic, turning to art whether in song, illustration, dance, or stories, like *Diggers*, can help us express what we went through and remind us of the strength that lies in human connection.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What types of artistic expression did you notice in the play? Were any unique to a character?
2. If the characters couldn't or didn't engage in artistic practices throughout the story, how would the story change?
3. How do the artistic activities shown in *Diggers* connect to elements of different African and African diasporic cultures?
4. What are some ways that you have made or could make connections through art? What are some ways that your community could connect through art?

RESOURCES

[Creative COVID Response Collection - University of Toronto Scarborough](#)

[Culture and Creativity Are Fundamental to Resilient Communities by Laurel Blatchford and Nella Young](#)

[Strengthening Youth Through Art Report - Surrey Art Gallery](#)



BLACK THEATRE WORKSHOP

432 – 3680 Rue Jeanne-Mance
Montréal, QC H2X 2K5
CANADA
514-932-1104
info@theatrebtw.ca
schools@theatrebtw.ca
blacktheatreworkshop.ca

Artistic Director | Dian Marie Bridge
Interim Managing Director | Adèle Benoit
Associate Program Director | Sarah Labissière
Marketing Manager | Laurie-Anne Jean-Baptiste
Outreach Coordinator | Rachel Chin
Associate Producer | Becks Lefranc
Admin. Coordinator | Huriell Jerome
Social Media Coordinator | Neelam Patel

Thank You to the Staff at Prairie Theatre Exchange



Thank You to Our Sponsors

TD Ready Commitment
Canada Council for the Arts
Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec
Conseil des arts de Montréal
The Cole Foundation
CKUT

Study Guide Prepared by Becks Lefranc (2023)