A Black Theatre Workshop Study Guide

TAKING CARE OF MAMAN

By Djennie Laguerre

2024 Tour Co-Produced by Black Theatre Workshop and Roseneath Theatre

Play Summary

In the middle of a pandemic lockdown, 12-year-old Eli finds herself having to take care of her maman, who is going through her "sadness" again. Left with a notebook from her maman to guide her, she reaches out to her elderly neighbour Madame Jean for help. Together, the two take on caring for Eli's maman, online school, and a very nosy neighbour in this heartwarming and funny story about community support and a friendship that spans generations.

Characters

Eli – A young, Black girl living with her mother during one of the COVID pandemic lockdowns. Eli is energetic and loves to dance, but has been dealing with a lot of hard things in life lately and is fighting to stay strong.

Madame Jean – An elderly Haitian woman living in the same apartment building as Eli. She can be judgmental, but cares deeply for Eli and her mom and will do whatever it takes to take care of them both.

Playwright



Djennie Laguerre is an Actress, Author and Storyteller and a graduate of the Stella Adler Acting Conservatory (New York) and the University of Ottawa (BAC in Art; Theatre and Literature).

She has been acclaimed as the performer and author) of Manman la mer at Théâtre la Catapulte and Espoir/Espwa (which she authored with Carline Zamar, Edwige Jean-Pierre) Le malade imaginaire, *LES ZINSPIRÉS and LES ZINSPIRÉS 3D, Seventeen (Anonymous) Women at the Infintheatre and REZ SISTERS at the Factory Theatre. She is the author and performer of Rendez-Vous with Home/Lakay at the SummerWorks Festival, 2008 and at the Théâtre français de Toronto, 2010 ALSO presented in several storytelling festivals such as Les Contes nomades (NAC) and Le Festival du loup de Lafontaine. She is proud of the ambitious tour of both English and French versions of Rendez-vous with Home/ Lakay with the iconic Black Theatre Workshop (Montreal, February 2018 and November 2019) and the English version with Roseneath Theatre in Toronto 2020. She received the Spotlight Award at the SummerWorks Festival in 2008 for Rendez-Vous with Home. She is a Dora Awards nominee for “Outstanding Performance – Individual” Rendez-Vous with Home 2020, for “Outstanding Performance – Individual” for Les Zinspirés and “Outstanding Performance – Ensemble”. Also nomination for “Best Actress” at the METAs Awards 2018 for Rendez-vous Home/ Lakay. Your children know her as the storyteller and dancer Madame Bonheur at MiniTFO/CBC.

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 and is the assistant director for this year's Stratford production of *Twelfth Night*. Dubuisson was Artistic Associate at Black Theatre Workshop (2020-23). She is a curator with the Arrivals Legacy Project. She graduated with distinctions from Concordia University's Theatre Program.

Discussion Topics

Chosen Family

In *Taking Care of Maman*, Eli's mom leaves Eli a notebook with instructions to ask their neighbour, Madame Jean, for help in case she starts experiencing her "sadness" again. Throughout the play, we see that Madame Jean does more than a neighbour usually would for the family and becomes a "grand-maman" to Eli. This kind of friendship where someone is eventually considered to be a family member has a lot of different names, like "play-cousins", "othermothers", "kinship", and "chosen family." While Madame Jean wasn't chosen family when Eli first spoke to her, Eli's maman knew that Madame Jean would understand why she told Eli to ask her for help.

The idea of "chosen family" is very common around the world, in many different cultures and countries. Black communities across the world especially value chosen family, and an older woman like Madame Jean would have met several people with chosen family, if not had some herself.

Someone who becomes chosen family can be any age and any background. Older people are typically seen as aunts, uncles, or grandparents, while younger people are often considered cousins, sometimes even siblings. These chosen family members are considered more than friends and have many of the same responsibilities as other family members. They're usually invited to birthdays, graduations, and weddings, and spend a lot of time with the family.

Chosen family members often help with taking care of children or providing company to older people, like in *Taking Care of Maman*. In some communities, like people who have recently immigrated or have lost their parents, chosen family steps in completely and becomes someone's entire family. Having chosen family can help people deal hard situations, learn new things, and feel more supported.

Discussion Questions:

1. What kind of family does Eli have when the play starts? Who is part of her family and what is her relationship like with those family members?
2. What is Eli and Madame Jean's relationship like at the start of the play? What is their relationship like at the end of the play?
3. What kind of things does Madame Jean do for Eli that would normally be done by a grandmother or other family member?
4. Did you know what chosen family was before you watched the play? Do you have any chosen family members, or do you know people who have some? Do you call "chosen family" by other names, including in other languages?

Haitian Community in Quebec

In *Taking Care of Maman*, Madame Jean is one of many immigrants from Haiti who have come to Canada, specifically to Quebec, over the past 75 years.

Haitian immigration to Quebec happened in "waves." The "first wave" of immigrants came in the 1960s and 70s after the president of Haiti, François Duvalier, declared himself "president-for-life" and made the country very unsafe to live in. This first wave of immigrants were teachers, doctors, lawyers, and nurses. They were people with a lot of education who had planned to move to Quebec temporarily, until Duvalier was no longer in charge of Haiti. At the same time, Quebec was going through the Quiet Revolution and needed a lot of new experienced workers in education, healthcare, and government. The Haitian immigrants were mostly able to find jobs like the ones they had at home and create a small community.

The second wave of Haitian immigrants came after Duvalier died in 1971 and his son became the next "president-for-life." With another dictator in charge and many people having lost their jobs and land, an even bigger "wave" of immigrants moved to Quebec. This wave mostly worked in factories, restaurants, and stores since these were some of the only jobs available. These jobs were often poorly paid, with long work hours and unsafe work conditions.

After this second wave, Haitian immigrants began facing more racism and discrimination, despite having been in Canada for many years and influencing Canadian science, literature, and music. The Haitian community outside of Haiti was also realizing that returning home might be too difficult after many decades away. In response, the Haitian community came together to create organizations like the Maison d'Haiti and the Office of the Haitian Community of Montreal to support each other. These organizations, and more, still exist today and continue to help new immigrants from Haiti and the community that has been in Quebec for decades.

Discussion Questions:

1. Madame Jean mentions that she has been in Canada for more than 40 years and that she is private school educated. Which "wave" do you think she came to Canada in? What do you think was going through her mind when she immigrated?
2. After the second wave of immigration, Haitian immigrants faced more racism and discrimination. Do you think Madame Jean's life changed? How do you think she felt during this time?

3. Madame Jean tells Eli that when her son was struggling in school, she had to fight back with her courage to get people to listen to her about what help her son needed. How do you think this experience prepared her to help Eli? Knowing what Madame Jean might have gone through in her life, can you imagine other times she would have had to fight with her courage?

Activities

These activities were originally created for the Roseneath Theatre study guide for *Taking Care of Maman* by Dr. Abigail Shabtay, Katelyn Conferido, Shukria Yusuf, Daniel Roldan, Emma Litschko, Kristy Smith, and Tita Kyrtsakas. For more activities and related resources please visit www.roseneath.ca/taking-care-of-maman.

Pre-Show Activity – "Language is Culture, and Culture is Language"

Big Idea:
Taking Care of Maman is full of cross-cultural references expressed through language. Eli and Madame Jean regularly interchange words and sentences in French and it is important to highlight the cultural value attached to language in theatrical work. In this activity, students will learn about the ways in which language can be used to communicate meaning in a variety of drama works. Students will have the opportunity to share personal cultural experiences attached to language and will also be encouraged to appropriately use language in future drama activities.

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify the ways in which dramatic elements in theatre contribute tounderstandings of contemporary social, economic, and cultural life.
- Compare and contrast how social values are communicated through language.
- Actively engage with the use of language throughout *Taking Care of Maman*.

Materials:

- Whiteboard/Chalkboard
- Computer and Access to Projector
- Chart Paper
- Markers
- Access to a digital collaboration platform (Google Jamboard)
- Devices with access to the internet

Activity:
Minds On (25 minutes)
Have a class discussion about 'culture': what is culture? What are some different traditions, celebrations, languages, food, or other cultural artifacts that students engage within their own cultures? Why is culture meaningful and important to our lives? Following the discussion, students can work in small groups to create a mind map on chart paper, or can work together as a class to create a large mind map on the class whiteboard/chalkboard. If students have electronic devices that can access the internet, the class can share their ideas on a digital collaboration platform, such as Jamboard. Once students have brainstormed a variety of ideas, prompt students to think critically about why language is significant to culture.

The following Ted Talk will teach students about the connection between language and culture, and will also highlight the ways in which language shapes worldviews.

How language shapes the way we think - Lera Boroditsky

After watching the Ted Talk, ask students to share their thoughts on the video and encourage students to think critically about the ways in which their own cultures are shaped by language. Examples of discussion questions:

- How does your language reflect your culture?
- What do you think the impact on your identity would be if you were to lose your language?
- If you speak another language at home, can you think of any examples of words or phrases in your family's language that cannot accurately be translated to English?

Action (35 minutes)
Divide the class into groups of four to five students. Give students chart paper and markers OR set up digital collaboration spaces to use for brainstorming (i.e. Jamboard or Google Docs).

Give students five minutes to come up with a list of words and/or expressions in a different language that cannot be directly translated to English. The list of words and/or expressions can include nicknames, terms of endearment, and other forms of colloquial language. If a student does not speak a second language at home, encourage them to apply their learning from French class to participate in this activity. Students may use an online dictionary, thesaurus, or Google Translate if they are struggling to think of words. The goal of this activity is for students to share their own cultural experiences attached to language.

After students have had time to compile their words and/or expressions, ask the groups to present their lists to the class. Invite students to ask questions and encourage them to think about ways in which the words and/or expressions would have to be expressed in English: how would the meaning of the expression change? Once all groups have presented, ask the class to think about the many ways in which different languages shape personal views and behaviors. Remind them that language can be used as a dramatic element in performance and encourage them to find ways to use it effectively in future activities.

Connect/Consolidate/Discuss (5 minutes):
As a class, summarize the importance of language for storytelling and remind students that the actors in *Taking Care of Maman* will be using French throughout the play. Conclude this lesson with follow-up questions that will encourage students to think critically about their learning.

Examples of discussion questions:

- What are the benefits of bilingual theatre?
- How can language shape relationships between characters in a play?
- If you miss something or do not understand some of the French dialogue in the play, what other strategies can you use to infer what was said? What clues in the actors' body language, mood, or expressions may tell you what is happening in the scene?

Post-Show Activity – Comfort in Movement

Big Idea:
At the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify movement that feels good for their bodies. They will also make mind and body connections by interpreting music from different genres and time periods through dance.

Materials:

- A computer, radio, or phone to play music through.

Activity:
Minds On (10 minutes)
Have an open discussion on how movement can engage multisensory learning and improve mental health. You can approach this lesson through exploring how the brain responds to physical activity by releasing 'feel-good' chemicals. Ask students to think about what sounds they hear when doing different physical activities and how that impacts how they feel. For example: going for a walk and hearing birds can make you feel calm and happy, while playing soccer and hearing coaches yell may make you feel anxious.

Action (15-20 minutes)
Have students stand in an area they have space to move around freely. Choose a song with an upbeat and energetic tone. Stand in a circle that includes everyone in the class, and invite students to share their favourite dance move in the middle of the circle. Following this activity, have students spread out throughout the space. Choose 4-5 songs from varying genres and have students move in ways that illustrate how they interpret the emotion of the song.

Connect/Consolidate/Discuss (first part- 15 minutes, second part- 30 minutes):

1) After dancing to the songs, have students talk about what different songs made them feel and how they used movement to illustrate these feelings, tones, and moods. Ask them to reflect on why they chose certain movements over others.
2) Have students ask a parent/guardian or grandparent to show them a dance move that was popular when they were young. The next day, have students show the class the dance move that they learned and compare it to their favourite dance move in the movement activity. Prompt students to reflect on how it makes them feel. If there is a cultural context to the move they learned, have students explain that too. Students may consider if the dance moves they learned come from a culturally specific genre of dance/music, or if the dance is performed at certain celebrations or holidays.

Optional Activity Extension:

- Once students create their favourite dance move and learn a dance move from an older person in their life, split students into groups and have each student contribute their two moves to create a full dance routine to a song of their choice.
- Assign students a culture from around the world and have them research that culture's dance styles and music. Students can give a presentation to the class showing videos and audio clips of those dance styles and music or can instead write a written report.

Post-show Activity – Overcoming Barriers to Mental Health Supports

Big Idea:
At the end of this lesson, students will be able to identify stress management strategies that they can use in their lives. They will also understand that sometimes they may need to reach out for additional support if their own stress management strategies are not enough to adequately care for their mental health. Students will also identify barriers that may prevent access to mental health support and resources, and brainstorm ways to overcome such barriers.

Materials:

- Chart paper and sticky notes or access to a digital collaboration platform like a Google Jamboard.
- Devices with access to the internet for student research.

Activity:
Minds On (10 minutes)
Have a group discussion about the ways in which the play's main character, Eli, tries to manage her stress on her own. Prompt them to think about which strategies are successful, and which ones are not. Ask students to share some of the strategies they use to manage their own stress, either by adding their thoughts to a digital collaboration board or writing them down on a sticky note to add to a piece of communal chart paper.

Action (30 minutes)
Explain that sometimes there are limits to how much we can manage stress on our own and that at times, we need to seek support and resources elsewhere. In small groups, have students discuss the following prompt:

> In the play, Eli downplays the severity of her challenges and resists seeking the help of other adults in her life like Miss Jean, her dad, and her social worker. What barriers are in the way of Eli accessing support and resources to help care for her mom and manage her own stress? What barriers are in the way of people accessing mental health support and resources in general? Students may consider personal, social, geographical, and financial barriers that impact access to mental health support in their communities.

Students may consider the following ideas:

- The pressure of feeling like you need to always keep everything under control.
- Existing stigmas about mental illness and needing help, and fears that others may not understand.
- Financial barriers that prevent people from accessing costly mental health support.

Have students brainstorm ways they could overcome the barriers they identified and research some resources and supports they could access. Students may find the following prompts useful:

- If you're having a hard time at home, who can you talk to?
- If you're having a hard time at school, who can you talk to?
- What are some apps/websites/resources you could access?
- If you want to reach out for help from a caring adult, what is the first thing you could say to someone?

- Research local mental health organizations that provide support for children and young people. Can you find resources or programs that are offered for free, or at a low cost?

Connect/Consolidate/Discuss (10 minutes):
Have groups share the barriers they identified, the ways in which they could overcome said barriers, and the resources that they found. As a class, brainstorm some of the ways that you could share this information with other people in your community (i.e., creating and posting infographics/posters around the school).

Additional Resources

Mental Health Resources
77 Children's Books About Mental Health – Child Mind Institute

National
- Youth Mental Health Canada: ymhc.ngo
- Healing in Colour: https://www.healingincolour.com/

Quebec
- Children and Youth Resources – AMI Québec
- Black Mental Health Connections Montreal (BMHC MTL)

Ontario
- Child and Youth Mental Health – Canadian Mental Health Association (Ontario Chapter)
- Knowledge Hub – Black Health Alliance

Helplines
- Kids Help Phone – 1-800-668-6868 – kidshelpphone.ca
- Black Youth Helpline – 1-833-294-8650 – blackyouth.ca

Connecting with the Elderly
Quebec
- Little Brothers: littlebrothers.ca
- The Yellow Door: www.yellowdoor.org
- The Council for Black Aging Community of Montreal: cbacm.org

Ontario
- Circle of Care: www.circleofcare.com/volunteer/
- Society of Sharing: societyofsharing.org

Sources

Leinaweaver, Jessaca. “Informal Kinship-Based Fostering around the World: Anthropological Findings.” *Child Development Perspectives*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, Sept. 2014, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4788099/.

Strong and Free (Podcast). “Haitian Diaspora in Quebec: Rhymes and Revolution.” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, Historica Canada, 18 Jan. 2022, www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/haitian-diaspora-in-quebec-rhymes-and-revolution.

Taylor, Robert Joseph, et al. “Older African American, Black Caribbean, and Non-Latino White Fictive Kin Relationships.” *Annual Review of Gerontology & Geriatrics*, U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2021, www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC9005029/.

Villefranche, Marjorie. “Partir pour rester - L’immigration Haïtienne Au Québec.” *Histoires d’immigrations Au Québec*, 1 Oct. 2014, pp. 145–162, https://doi.org/10.1515/9782760541177-011.

BLACK THEATRE WORKSHOP

432-3680 Rue Jeanne Mance
Montreal, 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
Marketing Manager | Laurie-Anne Jean-Baptiste
Program Manager | Keith Fernandez
Outreach Coordinator | Rachel Chin
Office Coordinator | Gabrielle Cole
Assistant Artistic Director | Adjani Poirier
Social Media Coordinator | Neelam Patel

Thank You to the Staff at Roseneath Theatre

Roseneath Theatre

Thank You to Our Sponsors

TD READY COMMITMENT
Canada Council for the Arts | Conseil des arts du Canada
CALQ Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE MONTRÉAL | Montréal
CKUT 90.3 FM

Study Guide prepared by Becks Lefranc (2024) with resources from Roseneath Theatre's *Taking Care of Maman* Study Guide