

Chicago Shakespeare Theater presents  
the Midwest premiere of

## *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*

Direct from a Tony Award-winning Broadway run

A vibrant comedy about West African immigrant women who find community in a Harlem salon  
Written by Jocelyn Bioh and directed by Chicago native Whitney White

January 14–February 2 in The Yard



Chicago—November 20, 2024— Straight from a twice-extended Broadway run, [Chicago Shakespeare Theater \(CST\)](#) presents the Midwest premiere of [Jaja's African Hair Braiding](#). Hailed as “wickedly entertaining” by *The Washington Post* and nominated for five Tony Awards including Best Play, *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* was written by award-winning, Ghanaian-American playwright **Jocelyn Bioh** (*School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play*, *Nollywood Dreams*) and is directed by Chicago native, Tony Award nominee, and Obie Award winner **Whitney White** (*Our Dear Dead Drug Lord*, *What to Send Up When It Goes Down*). The production runs **January 14–February 2, 2025** in The Yard.

The cast includes **Melanie Brezill**, **Leovina Charles**, **Victoire Charles**, **Yao Dogbe**, **Mia Ellis**, **Tiffany Renee Johnson**, **Jordan Rice**, **Awa Sal Secka**, **Aisha Sougou**, and **Bisserat Tseggai**.

This vibrant comedic gem offers a glimpse into the lives of a group of West African immigrant women who find community in a bustling Harlem hair salon. Over the course of a sweltering summer day, love ignites, dreams soar, and secrets unravel. Uncertainty simmers below the surface, and when it boils over, this tight-knit community is forced to confront what it means to be an outsider on the edge of the place they call home. With humor as rich as its characters, this play weaves hilarious moments with profound insights to create “an overwhelmingly affectionate portrait of Black female joy” (*TheaterMania*).

*Jaja's African Hair Braiding* is a co-production with **Arena Stage**, **Berkeley Repertory Theater**, and **La Jolla Playhouse** and is presented in association with **Madison Wells Live** and **LaChanze**. The play had its world premiere at Manhattan Theatre Club.

It's such a joy to be able to give the gift of this whip smart, funny, and original comedy to Chicago audiences,” shared Artistic Director **Edward Hall**. “Like all great comedies, there is plenty to laugh about and reflect on as Whitney White has orchestrated Jocelyn Bioh's play with the kind of dramatic perfection that is as rare as it is supremely enjoyable.”

“I am thrilled and honored that audiences beyond Broadway will get to come to 'the shop' and meet the vibrant women of *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*,” says Playwright **Jocelyn Bioh**. “This play means so much to me as both a native New Yorker and as a first-generation Ghanaian American as it speaks to the heart of what makes our country so beautifully unique: its rich diversity of people and culture. There is a real universality to these women's experiences, and I can't wait for audiences to connect and fall in love with each of them.”

The cast features three performers returning to the Chicago Shakespeare stage: **Melanie Brezill**, whose CST credits include *As You Like It* and *The Comedy of Errors*, along with Broadway and National Tour credits in *The Book of Mormon*, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, and *Mamma Mia!*; **Yao Dogbe**, returning to CST after appearing in *Richard III*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Short Shakespeare! Macbeth*; and **Tiffany Renee Johnson**, who appeared in CST's *Red Velvet* and whose other Chicago credits include *Blues for an Alabama Sky* at Remy Bumpo Theatre, *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play* at Goodman Theatre, and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* at Writers Theatre.

Making CST debuts are **Leovina Charles** (*The Lion King* on Broadway, *Lempicka* at La Jolla Playhouse), **Victoire Charles** (*Golden Age* and *Ruined* at Manhattan Theatre Club), **Mia Ellis** (*The Amen Corner* at Shakespeare Theatre Company), **Jordan Rice** (Ava DuVernay's film *Selma*), **Awa Sal Secka** (*After Midnight* at Paper Mill Playhouse, *Goddess* at Berkeley Repertory Theater), **Aisha Sougou** (*Beehive* and *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical* at Marriott Theatre), and **Bisserat Tseggai** (*The Jungle* at St. Ann's Warehouse, *For All The Women Who Thought They Were Mad* at Soho Repertory Theater).

Playwright **Jocelyn Bioh** is a Tony Award-nominated, Ghanaian-American writer and performer from New York City. Her other work includes *Merry Wives*, which won the 2022 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Adaptation, *Nollywood Dreams*, Broadway-bound musical *Goddess*, and the multi-award-winning *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play*, which has been produced more than 65 times regionally and in the UK. She was a Tow Playwriting Fellow and has won several playwriting awards including the Drama Guild's Hull-Warriner Prize, Steinberg Playwright Award, Lortel Award, and Drama Desk Award. Bioh has also written for TV series including *Russian Doll*, Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It*, *Tiny Beautiful Things*, and *The Acolyte*, and is also writing the upcoming film adaptation of the Broadway musical *Once on This Island* for Disney.

Director **Whitney White** is an Obie Award and Lilly Award-winning, as well as a Tony Award-nominated, director, writer, and musician from Chicago. *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* marks her CST debut, but it is also a homecoming; she fondly remembers field trips to CST productions as a high school student and credits a Shakespeare workshop at CST as an impactful early-career experience. Her Chicago credits include directing *The Most Spectacularly Lamentable Trial of Miz Martha Washington* at Steppenwolf Theatre, and other directing credits include the upcoming Broadway production of *The Last Five Years* starring Nick Jonas and Adrienne Warren, *What To Send Up When It Goes Down* (NYT Critic's Pick) and *Jordans* at The Public Theater, *The Secret Life of Bees* at The Almeida in the UK, and *Soft* at MCC Theatre (NYT Critic's Pick). Original works include *Semblance* (New York Theatre Workshop), *Definition* (Bushwick Starr), and *Macbeth in Stride* (American Repertory Theater, Under the Radar Festival at The Public Theater), for which she won an Elliot Norton Award for Outstanding Musical Performance. Her four-part cycle deconstructing Shakespeare's women is currently in development with American Repertory Theater and the Royal Shakespeare Company.

White is joined by the creative team from the Broadway production, including three-time Tony-winning scenic designer **David Zinn** (*Stereophonic*, *SpongeBob SquarePants: The Musical*, *The Humans*), returning to CST after designing the set for *The Notebook*; costume designer **Dede Ayite**, the first Black woman to win a Tony Award for Best Costume Design of a Play (*Jaja's African Hair Braiding*); Tony Award-nominated lighting designer **Jiyoun Chang** (*Stereophonic*, for *colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, *Slave Play*); Tony-nominated original music and sound designer **Justin Ellington** (*Jaja's African Hair Braiding*, for *colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*); Tony-nominated video designer **Stefania Bulbarella** (*Jaja's African Hair Braiding*); and Tony Award-winning hair and wig designer **Nikiya Mathis** (*Jaja's African Hair Braiding*). The company also includes associate director **Manna-Symone Middlebrooks**, dialect and vocal coach **Yetunde Felix-Ukwu**, intimacy consultant **Sierra Young**, associate sound designer **Dwaine Potts**, stage manager **Melanie J. Lisby**, and assistant stage manager **Brilliant Qi-Bell**. Casting is by **Caparellotis Casting**, **Kelly Gillespie** and **Erica A. Hart**.

There will be a student matinee performance during the run which will host nearly 600 students, 90% of whom are from Chicago Public Schools. This is one of many live performance opportunities for students offered in the 2024/2025 season, including student matinees of the Royal Shakespeare Company's *Pericles* this fall and 40 performances of *Short Shakespeare! A Midsummer Night's Dream* in the spring.

The press opening for *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* is scheduled for **Friday, January 17 at 7:00pm**.

More information at [www.chicagoshakes.com/jaja](http://www.chicagoshakes.com/jaja) or on social media at [@chicagoshakes](https://twitter.com/chicagoshakes).

# *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*

By Jocelyn Bioh

Directed by Whitney White

January 14–February 2, 2025

The Yard

## PERFORMANCE LISTING

- Tuesdays at 7:00 p.m.
- Wednesdays at 1:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. (*no matinee on January 15*)
- Thursdays at 7:00 p.m.
- Fridays at 7:00 p.m.
- Saturdays at 2:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m.
- Sundays at 2:00 p.m.

Chicago Shakespeare strives to make its facility and performances accessible to all patrons. Accessible seating, assistive listening devices, large-print and Braille programs, and sensory tools are available at every performance. Enhanced performances include:

- **Audio-described performance with optional touch tour – Sunday, January 26 at 2:00 p.m.**  
*A program that provides spoken narration of a play's key visual elements for patrons who are blind or have low vision. Touch Tours provide patrons the opportunity to experience, firsthand, a production's design elements.*
- **Open captioned performance – Wednesday, January 29 at 1:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m.**  
*A text display of the words and sounds heard during a play, synced live with the action onstage*
- **ASL interpreted performance – Thursday, January 30 at 7:00 p.m.**  
*All dialogue and lyrics are translated into American Sign Language by two certified interpreters*

## CREATIVE TEAM

Jocelyn Bioh - Playwright

Whitney White - Director

David Zinn - Set Designer

Dede Ayite - Costume Designer

Jiyoun Chang - Lighting Designer

Justin Ellington - Original Music and Sound Designer

Stefania Bulbarella - Video Designer

Nikiya Mathis - Hair and Wig Designer

Manna-Symone Middlebrooks - Associate Director

Yetunde Felix-Ukwu - Dialect and Vocal Coach

Erica A. Hart, CSA - Casting

Kelly Gillespie, CSA - Casting

David Caparelliotis, CSA - Casting

Sierra Young - Intimacy Consultant

Dwaine Potts - Associate Sound Designer

Melanie J. Lisby - Stage Manager

Brilliant Qi-Bell - Assistant Stage Manager

## CAST

Melanie Brezill - Michelle, Chrissy, LaNiece

Leovina Charles - Vanessa, Sheila, Radia

Victoire Charles - Jaja

Yao Dogbe - James, Franklin, Olu, Eric

Mia Ellis - Jennifer

Tiffany Renee Johnson - Aminata

Jordan Rice - Marie

Awa Sal Secka - Bea

Aisha Sougou - Ndidi

Bisserat Tseggai - Miriam

Onye Eme-Akwari - *Nollywood Dreams* Actor

Morgan Scott - *Nollywood Dreams* Actor

Kevin Medesse Aouso - Understudy

Renea S. Brown - Understudy

Debora Crabbe - Understudy

## CHICAGO SHAKESPEARE THEATER (CST)

A Regional Tony Award recipient, Chicago Shakespeare Theater produces a bold and innovative year-round season that includes Shakespeare, original plays, musicals, family programming, and international theatrical events. CST is committed to serving as a cultural center across its three stages—the 700+ seat Yard, 500 seat Jentes Family Courtyard Theater, and the 200 seat Carl and Marilyn Thoma Theater Upstairs as well as in classrooms, neighborhoods, and venues around the world. CST has a deep commitment to education and lifelong learning with robust programming for students, teachers, and lifelong learners, and engagement with communities across the city. Onstage, in classrooms and neighborhoods across the city, and in venues around the world, Chicago Shakespeare is a multifaceted theater—inviting audiences, artists, and community members to share powerful stories that illuminate the complexities, ambiguities, and wonders of our world.

[www.chicagoshakes.com](http://www.chicagoshakes.com)