

**A Study Guide for *Sophiatown*
and its Abridged Version**

Original play by the Junction Avenue Theatre Company
abridgment by Modupe Olaogun

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Introduction for Teachers

About AfriCan Theatre Ensemble

AfriCan Theatre Ensemble (ATE) is a not-for-profit theatre organization with charitable status whose mission is to make African theatre accessible to the public through performances of old and new creations, workshops and staged productions of plays originating from or inspired by Africa. Founded in 1998, AfriCan Theatre Ensemble recognizes the power of live art to inspire and renew the human spirit and to forge human relationships across cultures, creeds, ethnicities, ideologies, genders, and social classes. To that end, its work presents the different theatrical idioms, traditions and experiences from which the various playwrights tap and in so doing creates an avenue for cultural exchange between Africa and Canada and the rest of the world.

The Role of AfriCan Theatre Ensemble in the arts community and the broader community

AfriCan Theatre Ensemble has given the Canadian public a decade of high quality theatre in the Toronto area. In Canada, there are very few “Black” arts organizations that consistently present work informed by continental African aesthetics and specifically offer opportunities for African-Canadian playwrights, actors, directors and artists who originate in African countries. AfriCan Theatre Ensemble therefore provides a unique opportunity to theatre-goers, educators, other “Black” arts organizations, theatre companies, community and civic organizations, social service organizations, heritage and cultural organizations, media, performers and artists to provide a voice and context for African culture in Canada.

Service to Artists

AfriCan Theatre Ensemble has been a training ground and a launch-pad in African theatre for many promising artists and directors over the years. The artists who have worked with the organization include d’bi.young anitafrika, Rhoma Spencer, Rebecca Fisseha, Bayo Akinfemi, Lucky Ejim, Ayo Adewumi, Louis Mercier, Teddy Masuku and Olivia Duodu. The cast of the abridged version of *Sophiatown* presented in the Greater Toronto Area in February 2010 is made up of Antonio Cayonne as “Jakes,” Patience Mpumlwana as “Lulu,” Catherine Rainville as “Ruth,” and Marc Senior as “Mingus.” The play is directed by Mumbi Tindyebwa Out and designed by Mimi Amatu; with Mafa Makhubalo as choreographer, Akufuna Sifuba as music director and Ebaita Okunbo as stage manager.

Service to Culturally Diverse Communities

Recent African immigrants among the audiences especially feel their heritage validated by AfriCan Theatre Ensemble’s performances. Some of the people who have worked with ATE are new immigrants with significant experience in their home countries but who need a springboard to utilize their abilities and contribute their talents to their present society. Jude Idada, Bayo Akinfemi, Muoi Nene, Ayo Adewumi, Aktina Stathaki and Teddy Masuku are a few of the examples.

Service to Youth

AfriCan Theatre Ensemble's school show program has brought theatre successfully into local schools and students from grades 4 to 12 into formal theatre venues. This program disseminates theatre to youth; helps nurture their aesthetic response; and pro-actively promotes cultural literacy. ATE's school show is heavily discounted to make theatre accessible to young people.

Sophiatown: The Historical, Cultural and Artistic Contexts

Sophiatown is one of the landmark plays of our time. Created by the Junction Avenue Theatre Company of Johannesburg, South Africa, the play recreates an urban South African community during Apartheid in the 1950s. The historical town of Sophiatown and many urban communities like it, which were regarded as "black townships" in South Africa, were about to be demolished to make room for a gentrified purely white society. On the part of the policy makers was the genuine belief that this modern segregation of races and ethnic groups made perfect sense. The play instead reveals something that is overlooked in such contexts: an inherent human resistance to dispossession and an irrepressible yearning for choice and freedom of association.

Sophiatown examines intercultural and inter-ethnic interactions and further explores questions of: *How can we learn to respect one another's differences in a culturally pluralistic society? What does a family or a community feel when it confronts imminent and inevitable destruction of its abode? What kind of empathy does the imagining of such an experience of trauma call for? What language, what symbolism and what kind of plot does a representation of this experience demand of the playwright wishing to capture the intensity, urgency and nuances of such a story without the representation becoming sensational or strident?*

Historical Background

The original creators of the play *Sophiatown* came together in 1976 to form a group, Junction Avenue Theatre Company. Members of two companies—one white, the other black—merged. Their goal was to represent a "working model of non-racial democracy," in the words one of one of the members, Malcolm Purkey (xi). This goal has special significance in the context of South Africa of the time. South Africa is a country located in the southern tip of Africa covering an area of 1.22 million square kilometers. Local indigenous populations had lived in the area for several centuries; among the prominent groups were the Xhosa, Zulu and Sotho peoples. In mid 17th century the social and cultural landscapes changed when Europeans began to appear in the coastal areas, first as merchants and explorers en route to Asia, and later as settlers. The first aggregate of Europeans made up of Dutch, German, Flemish and French settlers came to be called "Boers." The arrival of British settlers swelled the European population but not anywhere near enough to obliterate the indigenous occupants. The new arrivals included Malay, Indonesian, Madagascar and Indian slaves brought as cheap labour by the Dutch merchants. The discovery of precious minerals in the area—diamonds in the 1860s and gold in the 1880s—increased the battle for the control of South Africa. The indigenous populations resisted their displacement by the European settlers. Between the Dutch and the British settlers, there was a bitter

rivalry for political domination and control of resources. Meanwhile, South Africa continued to attract people of other nationalities and ethnicities, thus swelling the multicultural composition of the society. The political developments in the country were such that the Europeans succeeded in wresting political control from the majority black population—until 1994 when the first multiracial election took place in South Africa to usher a new democratic society.

The Union of South Africa, a cohesive modern country, was proclaimed in 1910 and for the next eighty years a succession of political parties with a “white” ideology steered the country into a racist, segregationist society, with the white population numbering making up less than twenty percent of the country’s population appropriating eighty percent of the land and the rich natural resources.

The 1950s, the period that Junction Avenue Theatre Company decided to recreate in their play, witnessed pronounced dispossession of the blacks and increased segregation of the “racial group.” The instruments utilized by the white government included legal barriers, severe sanctions and force— all directed against the black population, which was equally determined to fight back.

When the members of Junction Avenue Theatre Company decided to create the play *Sophiatown* in 1984, South Africa was experiencing one of its darkest moments. The struggle between the racist National Party—the ruling party—and and fighters for democracy was at its extreme, according to a contemporary scholar, David Graver (23). Young South Africans, including students, had joined the fight against apartheid even long before; human casualties had grown.

Why now?

Junction Avenue Theatre Company first staged *Sophiatown* in 1986 in South Africa. The reason the members chose to explore the events of the 1950s was that they had an “obsession to reclaim and popularize the hidden struggle in our country” (Purkey xi). They elaborate:

We need an informed and articulate new generation, steeped in the past and carefully theorizing about the future, who have shaken off the blanket of silence and are committed in the deepest way to liberation. We believe that one of the most effective ways to communicate ideas, information and feelings is through the living theatrical encounter. (xi)

It was not surprising therefore that the company revived the play in 1993 to celebrate the end of apartheid, the name given by its originators, the white National Party, to a system whereby ownership and occupation of land was restricted to a specified population ensuring that non-whites were removed from central and luscious areas and relocated to ghettos.

Sophiatown, the township that gives the play its title, was thickly populated. Although it was regarded as a black township, the reality was that it was also a haven, a meeting place for many South Africans of all colours and classes who were artists, writers, musicians and intellectuals, and who found the vibrant, mingling community of Sophiatown nourishing. The spaces for the hanging out of the artists and the intellectuals in Sophiatown were the “shebeens,” which were the illegal bars in the black

townships that provided an economic source of livelihood for many female-headed households. Sophiatown also had more than its fair share of gangsters, who were exposed to the Americana gangster movies of the era and who regarded the actions of these movies as validation and inspiration. But where there are gangs, who make their living through robberies, there is bound to be violence and where there is physical violence, there is bound to be verbal violence and the use of swear words. The playwrights chose to be truthful to these sociological and historical realities and to reflect them without apology or sensationalism.

Why here?

AfriCan Theatre Ensemble's attraction to *Sophiatown* comes from the compelling drama, the story and the entertainment value. Using ensemble characterization in which the characters are equally important, as well as music and costume that emotionally and visually intensify the audience's experience, the play re-creates the 1955 forced removal of the people who lived in the urban community known as Sophiatown. Relying on the Group Areas Act and the Resettlement Act which the white legislature had passed for the entire country in 1949, the government of the day set about demolishing the homes in Sophiatown to make way for the establishment of a whites-only community to which the name, Triomf, was given. There were many forceful removals everywhere and they accompanied other acts that implemented apartheid, a system of racial hierarchy and segregation that placed white people at the top, black people at the bottom, and people of Asian descent, and mixed "races" in between. The instituted practices of apartheid generated violence—state-sponsored, as in the armored police vans with notorious canine units that hunted down non-whites suspected to be where the apartheid laws prohibited them or snooped on them for contravening another law that prohibited intercourse between whites and non-whites. The other form of violence it generated was among the dispossessed and repressed populations who were forced into overcrowded ghettos and denied access to social services such as unemployment benefits for which their white counterparts qualified. This group naturally fought their tormentors back as best they could. An overcrowded ghetto was likely to be a breeding ground for petty and more serious crimes like armed burglary.

Traumatic displacements of peoples, some human-made and some nature-generated, continue to be a reality in different societies of the world. In some parts of the globe indigenous populations are displaced by powerful multinational corporations and economic empires which want to excavate precious minerals and oil. In many cases the proceeds do not benefit the dispossessed indigenous populations. Settlers in Canada too had participated in wholesale displacements of previous inhabitants in the past, but contemporary Canada realizes that it cannot afford to be ethically indifferent with regards to appropriate forms of reparation and to safeguards that would ensure justice for all. The multicultural world of *Sophiatown* has resonance for many societies today, as constant migration and global cross-cultural communication that has resulted from the Wide World Web increasingly make it difficult to think of any society that can maintain "the purity of its racial blood" as some people believe(d).

Synopsis of *Sophiatown*, the play

Sophiatown is about a household living in a “freehold” home. The head of the house is a widow whose two children – Lulu, a teenage school girl, and Mingus, a young man who is getting involved in gangs – live with her. The family has other tenants, including Mingus’s girlfriend Princess and sidekick Charlie, a journalist Jakes, who works for a popular sensational magazine, and a political activist in his forties, Fahfee, who runs an illegal betting game. Into this household arrives a young Jewish woman, Ruth Golden, from a middleclass white neighbourhood. The young woman is responding to an advertisement by the journalist Jakes for a “white girl” to come share his apartment so that he can observe a white woman’s ways. However, the young woman has come on a search of her own. She wants to find out: *how does it feel to be black?* Ruth Golden’s question is expanded by the other characters as *what does it mean to be white, to be Jewish?*

The integration of Ruth into the household takes the form of Ruth learning the in-language of the township and taking lessons from other members of the household on how to deal with gangsters who have taken to terrorising the neighbourhood. It involves conversations and rituals through which each ethnic group’s assumptions about the other, and gender assumptions, are exposed.

Just as it appears that Ruth is settling into the household, they receive notice of the removal. There is some fallout in the household. For instance, Mingus’s girlfriend, finally rejecting his abuse, leaves him. Still the members rally to resist the forced removal—if not by action but by will. The day the removal takes place, they are unable to stop it.

The Abridged Version of the play

In order to enable students in schools in the Greater Toronto Area to experience a professional performance of this play on their own premises, AfriCan Theatre Ensemble undertook an abridgment and adaptation of *Sophiatown*. In order not to confuse it with the full-length play we refer to the abridgment as “Softown,” which is another name for “*Sophiatown*” in the original. The abridged version runs for approximately 45 minutes long. The adaptation is a compression of the actions. As a travelling show, it had to involve a reduction of the cast size in such a way that the original characters, which number eight, will still be strongly felt. The cast for the abridged version is four. The experience makes it possible to increase the exposure of *Sophiatown* and to enable AfriCan Theatre Ensemble to create mobile and economically viable show, capable of being staged with four actors who are cast to undertake multiple role-playing.

Language

In adapting this play for its school program, AfriCan Theatre Ensemble considers the audience and what constitutes age-appropriate material. Some of *Sophiatown*’s characters have a tendency to use swear words and one of them, a gangster, has a schizophrenic attitude towards women that can be described as follows: in one minute he is protective and adoring towards his biological sister and his

girlfriend; in another minute he is aggressive and threatening towards the same girlfriend. When we showed the script of *Sophiatown* to some teachers they confirmed our apprehension about parts of the scenes that depict violent behaviour and the characters that use “foul” language. However, the teachers also agreed with our viewpoint that children need to be comprehensively educated about their world. As the school children who live in Canada witness violence in their own society, where some gang members have infiltrated some schools, and where misogyny has not been eradicated but is a theme embraced by some popular genres of musical video and *youtube* entertainment, the teachers we consulted said they saw value in the opportunity school children will have to participate thoughtfully in conversations about those states of affairs. While the teachers found the unabridged *Sophiatown* quite fine for upper level students (namely grades 7 – 12), for the junior levels (grades 1 – 6), the teachers warmed up to a dramatization that does not glorify violence and that moderates the violent language. Fortunately, the glossary that accompanies the original published version of *Sophiatown* make it possible to find suitable substitutes for some expressions that teachers would not want young pupils to emulate.

The text of *Sophiatown* is written in English, but it also makes clear a desire to capture the flavour of the play’s multiethnic urban setting where Afrikaans (the South African form of the Dutch language of the descendants of the settlers from Holland), isiZulu, Setswana, isiXhosa and Tsotsitaal—the urban gangsters’ language—are interjected into the English that is widely spoken. The published text, therefore, gives us dialogues that are typically in English but with extensive interjections ranging in length from a word to a phrase and to a sentence in these other languages. By placing the English translations next to the non-English interjections, the authors of the published text give the performing company a choice and flexibility in the degree to which it wants to retain the multiethnic flavour. The abridged version uses the English translations for most of the non-English interjections, making exceptions for some South Africanisms in the various languages whose contextual use makes their meanings transparent.

Music

Music is one of South Africa’s remarkable cultural productions, as exemplified by the records and CDs of groups like SDASA Chorale of Soweto, Ladysmith Black Mambazo and the Manhattan Brothers or individual singers like Miriam Makeba whose extraordinary range and unique renditions have made indelible impressions upon the world. *Sophiatown* (the township) was where the legendary South African singer, Dolly Rathebe, grew up. It is not surprising that music plays a prominent role in the play, *Sophiatown*. It is one of the devices through which the historical ambience is conveyed; it is also a tribute to the legendary status of music as an expressive form in South African arts. The abridged version maintains the prominent role of music. The production by AfriCan Theatre Ensemble uses live music sung by the cast members and professionally choreographed.

Style

In its presentation, the original play uses a vignette style, with each vignette advancing the plot. Each scene foregrounds one member of the household or another or an important interaction between the members, as everyone adjusts to the new element their midst, namely the arrival of the young Jewish lady, Ruth; and as the members rally one last act of resistance to the impending doom of the demolition. Three of the characters constitute a nuclear family that is familiar to most Canadians. But this family unit thrives by admitting more persons into the household. The definition of “family” that we encounter is a hybrid of biological and adopted members. The multicultural cast reflects parallels with contemporary cosmopolitan Canadian society. The characters of *Sophtown* are people that students can touch and feel. The play integrates music to depict a significant period in South African history that continues to resonate with contemporary societies. For school children curious about ethnicities that have contributed towards Canadian cultural pluralism, *Sophtown* is a rich and powerful tableau of one of these societies – South Africa.

The Characters

Jakes is a journalist in his twenties. He is a reporter for Drum, a family magazine started in 1951 and aimed at blacks. Jakes is what the locals call a “situation”— an intellectual. He is educated and works as a journalist for a sensational magazine. A boarder himself in Mamariti’s house, he has advertised for a white girl to come and board with him for experimental purposes. He is the narrator of the play.

Mingus is gangster in his late twenties. He thinks of himself as a “Robin Hood” figure—one who has a noble aspiration to help the poor by waylaying and robbing the rich. But Mingus’s violence cannot be overlooked. It is also a matter for debate whether or not he uses his personal convictions to any broader political advantage. Mingus has a side-kick, **Charlie**, who goes with him everywhere.

Lulu is the sixteen-year old sister of Mingus and attends school. In “Softown” she sometimes impersonates Mingus’s girl-friend, **Princess**, a young woman in her twenties. In the abridged version, she conveys also the views of her mother, **Mamariti**, who is the landlord and who operates a shebeen; and the views of the political activist and member of the African National Congress, **Mr Fahfee**, who operates an illegal betting game.

Ruth is a Jewish woman in her twenties. She has responded to the advertisement by Jakes, but she has an inquiry of her own that she is interested in pursuing.

Preparing to see the show

Classroom activities:

1. Engage in a classroom study and discussion of South Africa and its peoples; South Africa and its music; South Africa in the 1950s; South Africa and the Apartheid policy, etc. Examples of some of the legislation that was used to institute apartheid include the following:

1948: Asiatic Amendment Act – withdrew Indian representation in Parliament (there was no African representation at all).

Electoral Laws Amendment Act – made more stringent the conditions for registering Coloured voters.

1949: Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act – made marriages between whites and non-whites illegal and placed the onus of deciding the race of any person on the marriage officer. If a person domiciled in South Africa entered into a mixed marriage outside the country, the marriage was to be void in South Africa.

Unemployment Insurance amendment Act – excluded from the benefits available under the Act all those whose earnings did not exceed £182 a year (the majority of African workers [who have been systematically excluded from educational and socio-economic opportunities that would put them in competitive positions]) and all migratory workers irrespective of their earnings.

Native Laws Amendment Act – created special labour bureaux for Africans. These bureaux are designed, not primarily for the benefit of workers, but to restrict the flow of African workers to the towns so that an abundant supply of labour is always available for the mines and the farms.

1950: Group Areas Act – provided for the establishment of racial ghettos in which ownership and occupation of land would be restricted to a specified population group. [There was forceful removal of black, coloured and Indian people from the cities as a result of this proclamation].

1953: Bantu Education Act – transferred Bantu Education from the provinces to the Department of Native Affairs. [The education of whites was not ethnicized].

1954: Natives Resettlement Act – provided for the establishment of a Resettlement Board to undertake the forcible removal of 57,000 Africans in Sophiatown, Martindale, Newclare, and Pageview, the so-called “black spots” in the western area of central Johannesburg, to Meadowlands and Diepkloof, over ten miles south west of the city. Sophiatown was one of the new remaining areas in South Africa where Africans enjoyed freehold land ownership rights. Such rights would not exist in the new townships, and furthermore all Africans were to be segregated there along lines.

Source: www.anc.org.za/books/reich9.html. There are more examples of these legislations on the website.

2. Have students make predictions about what the production might look like, given the specific genre of the play – historical genre.
3. Have students discuss the various forms used in the storytelling tradition (dance, song, poetry, etc.) and have students determine what the mixture of these forms contributes to storytelling and to a drama. Make students determine the ways *Sophiatown* and “Softown” make use of narration, song and dance, and the impact.

After Seeing the Performance

Class Discussions:

1. Have students compare their predictions about what the production would look like with what they actually saw. This can be a group exercise with groups comparing what stood out for them in the plays.
2. Have students describe the kind of storytelling they encounter in this play. The narrator is the journalist, Jakes. How does Jakes' profession affect the way he narrates the story?
Have members of the class imagine and demonstrate other scenarios of narration, for instance a politician or a nurse, or an engineer or a photographer, or a computer animator. Ask them to describe the differences in tone, attitude to the story, emphasis, etc.
3. Some of the themes of "Softown" such as gangsterism and intercultural communications are relevant to the daily lives of high school students in many urban centres. "Softown" can be explored and illustrated on a number of levels to accommodate different grades. For example, older elementary students may enter a discussion of cultural differences and similarities between people of diverse backgrounds or have varying perceptions of gangsters as villains or possibly as "cool."
4. High school students may enter a discussion of a more subjective nature on "How gangs and gangsterism are a response to the society we live in" or "the positive and negative effects of segregation on the community being segregated and on the society that segregates them."

Character Analysis:

1. The characters are all unique but there are some elements that they share or that cause some of them to gravitate to one another.
 - a. Have students identify the uniqueness of each character and illustrate their observations with specific elements they identify with the character, for instance, the dressing, the speech patterns, the kinds of themes and images that come up in the characters' speeches and actions, etc.
 - b. Have the students match the characters in terms of shared ideas, dressing, etc.
2. **Ruth** accuses **Jakes** of putting himself on the sidelines of the historic social event, namely the resistance that **Mr Fahfee** is encouraging. Ask the students to reflect on this observation. Do they find it justified?
Lulu argues that since "Bantu education" was a sham and there was no reason to go to the Bantu schools. Ask students to suggest possible alternatives to this radical decision.
Ask students to discuss the comparison that **Mingus** implies between him and Robin Hood.

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