



Walton Arts Center

Performance Guide



Sunjata Kamalenya

Photo Credit: McCarter Theatre Center

A wandering hunter comes to the village of Farrakoro and makes the unbelievable prediction that a crippled boy and his outcast mother will overcome all odds to deliver their nation from a powerful warlord. Sunjata Kamalenya, (Bambara language for Sunjata for Youth), celebrates the greatest hero of West African legend, Sunjata Keita, the first king of the ancient Empire of Mali. The Experiential Theater Company (New Jersey) brings the tale to life, immersing the audience in African culture and music and inviting students to perform alongside the actors to tell a tale of adversarial struggles and how the strength of community is derived from the power of faith in one another.

Ideas for Curriculum Connections

Arkansas Learning Standards: RL.3.2, RL.4.2, RL.5.2; RL.3.6, RL.4.6, RL.5.6; W.3.8, W.4.8, W.5.8; SL.3.1, SL.4.1, SL.5.1; SL.3.4, SL.4.4, SL.5.4; SL.3.5, SL.4.5, SL.5.5; L.3.3, L.4.3, L.5.3. Fine Arts Standards Theatre: CR.1.3.1, CR.1.4.1, CR.1.5.1; CR.2.3.2, CR.2.4.2, CR.2.5.2; R.7.3.1, R.7.4.1; R.9.3.1, R.9.4.1; R.9.3.3, R.9.4.3; CN.11.3.2, CN.11.4.2; CR.1.5.1; CR.3.5.1; R.7.5.1; R.8.5.1; CN.11.5.3.



Photo Credit: zenzelecooper.com

The Story

Passed on through oral tradition for the past 800 years, the legend of Sunjata is one of the greatest stories of the West African Mande people. Prophesized to grow up and save his people from great danger, Sunjata navigates a world of spears and sorcery, jealousy and pettiness, with his mother, Sogolon, by his side. The legend, continued today by African storytellers, called *jeli*, celebrates Sunjata's journey to become the greatest *mansa* (ruler) his people ever had. The title, *Sunjata Kamalenya*, is a combination of the main character's name, Sunjata, with the Mandinka word, Kamalenya, which means youth.

The Performance

The performance is an interactive experience. The play begins when the adult storyteller, the *jelimuso*, whisks the audience back in time to 13th century Mali. From there, traditional costumes, scenery and music immerse the audience in the story, and students are invited to participate in the storytelling. The style of theater is called "experiential theater" and allows students to act out stories without rehearsals using general knowledge of character and storytelling. Through a series of actor lead prompts, students physically assume the roles of characters and create the dialogue on the spot. Every performance is unique and students' excitement is apparent when they are given the opportunity to make creative decisions about their characters based upon their understanding of the imagined situation.

The Artists

Sunjata Kamalenya was directed by Christopher T. Parks, and created for stage by Christopher Parks, David C. Conrad and Balla Kouyate. Originally from Mali, composer Balla Kouyate arranged traditional songs as well as composed new musical pieces for the show. The Kouyate family are renowned as storytellers and musicians, and Kouyate is no exception. He was raised in the Djeli tradition, which he learned from his father at the age of six, and is also a noted balaphone player.

David C. Conrad provided historical context as the leading authority on the tale of Sunjata. Specializing in oral tradition, Conrad helped guide and support the research into the Mande society and provided the primary source material for the play's script.

Parks' company, the Experiential Theater Company, has toured the show in the US and believes fully that "if you're in the room, you're in the show!" Through the company's faithful commitment to bringing the performance to life, American audiences will experience the legends of Sunjata with the same emotion as is shared in countries such as Mali, Guinea and The Ivory Coast.

Learning Activities

Research

To better understand Sunjata's world, ask students to research the Mali Empire in the 13th Century. Ask students to create field reports from one of the countries that made up the Mali Empire. Visit the website below for maps, and descriptions of the Mali Empire. Example questions:

- What has been the Empire's impact on language, customs and culture?
- How did the Niger River shape trading, economy and expansion across Western Africa?

The Mali Empire

<https://africa.si.edu/exhibits/resources/mali/index.htm>

Language & Vocabulary

Since the Mali Empire encompassed several countries across Western Africa, languages were diverse. The people of West Africa speak Bambara, and dozens of Bambara language phrases and words are woven into the play. Below are a few words that the *jeli*, or storyteller, may share:

- **Amina-Amen** -"I agree", a form of affirmation
- **Bara Muso** - The favorite wife.
- **Jeli** - A jeli is a storyteller, entertainer, praise singer, usually jeli sing a good portion of their tales.
- **Jelimuso** - A female jeli
- **Kamalenya** -The Bambara word for youth.

- **Mansa** - Chief/leader/ruler.
- **Naamu-sayer** -The performance supporter of the jeli, who invokes the word "naamu" and all of its various forms and intonations in support of the jeli's story, usually after each sentence in the story is pronounced.
- **Naamu** -"It's true", "You're right", "I hear you", "Yes", a word of affirmation
- **Sabu** - A woman who is responsible for the success of a man, usually a sister or mother, and usually due to some magical intervention.
- **Tunya** -"I agree", another form of affirmation

Post Performance Learning Activity

Sunjata Kamalenya tells the story of a person on a journey to fulfill a prophecy. Every journey has a beginning, middle and end. The beginning is the reason for going. The middle journey has different roads, places on the way, people who help or hinder the hero. The end of the journey is the arrival home. After seeing the performance, discuss Sunjata's experience through the lens of the Hero's Journey:

- Discuss the beginning, middle and end of Sunjata Kamalenya
- How was the story told? How did being a part of the performance help you relate to Sunjata?
- How does Sunjata's disability, and his Mother's social rejection help shape Sunjata's story?
- What makes Sunjata step up and decide to take on the warlord?
- Chart the places the hero stops along the way. What obstacles were overcome?
- What impact does family have on Sunjata's journey? Describe the end of their journey:
- What does Sunjata accomplish?
- How will the lives of the villagers change now that Sunjata has returned?

Connect To The World

- Ask students to describe a journey they or someone they know has taken.

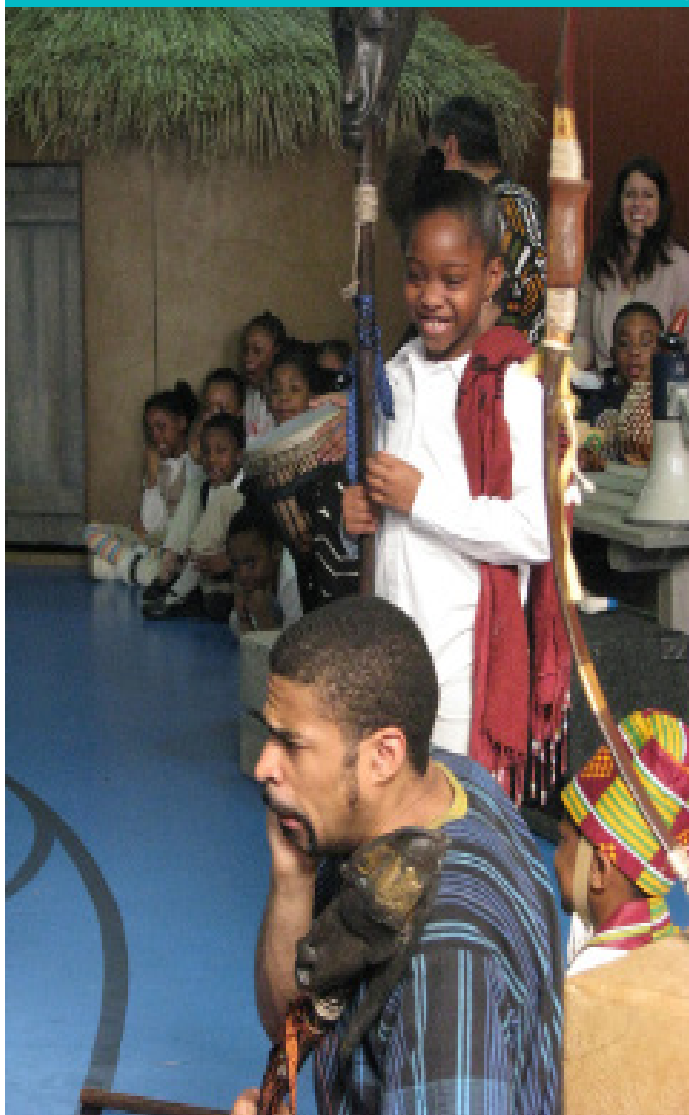


Photo Credit: McCarter Theatre Center



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Reflect and Assess

Ask the following questions. Record the group's answers on the board and discuss.

- What did you notice about *Sunjata Kamalenya*?
- Describe the characters. Who were they? What were they doing? Why?
- What did you like most about the live performance?
Dances? Costumes? Set? Props? Music?
- Would you have performed the story differently? How?
- How did the music help tell the story?
- How did the performance make you feel?
- What moment in the play do you remember most?

Learn More Online

Official website of Experiential Theater Company

<http://www.exptheater.org/sunjata-kamalenya.html>

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Learning & Engagement

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