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THE PLAY

"D-O-U-B-T-F-U-L. Doubtful."

Eleven year-old **Akeelah Anderson** has several doubts.

Growing up on the South Side of Chicago, Akeelah doubts that her older brother **Reggie** will stay out of trouble. She doubts that she will get to class without being bullied. She even doubts that she can win the school spelling bee ... until she does.

Akeelah now has the opportunity to compete at the District Bee, and perhaps the State Bee. With a talent like hers, she could even qualify for Nationals in Washington, D.C. But what will her friends and neighbors think about her being such a brainiac? Even worse, what will her mother **Gail** say if she finds Akeelah having fun with words rather than finishing her homework?

Dr. Joshua Larabee, a tough yet brilliant professor, decides to coach Akeelah on how to be a top speller. He believes that "she has the gift" and "time will determine if she has the character."

Can Akeelah find the courage within herself to become a champion?

**"WORDS ARE PICTURES.
PICTURES OF IDEAS. IF YOU
CAN SEE THE PICTURE, YOU
CAN SEE THE WORD TO SPELL."**

— Dr. Joshua Larabee



AKEELAH AND THE BEE

ADAPTED FOR THE STAGE BY **CHERYL L. WEST**
BASED ON THE ORIGINAL SCREENPLAY BY **DOUG ATCHISON**
DIRECTED BY **CHARLES RANDOLPH-WRIGHT**

**NOW PLAYING IN THE KREEGER THEATER
NOVEMBER 13 - DECEMBER 27, 2015**

MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



CHERYL L. WEST

“My work is always about resiliency. That when people face obstacles, what does it take to overcome those obstacles?”

Cheryl L. West was born and raised in Markham, Illinois. Starting as a teacher and social worker in Chicago, West was dedicated to her students and community members. Their stories inspired the characters that now inhabit her plays. She made a promise to herself when she started writing: if she could not find success within a few years of being a writer, she would quit.

Over 20 years later, West continues to build an impressive canon of American works. Five of these (*Before It Hits Home*, *Jar The Floor*, *Holiday Heart*, *Pullman Porter Blues* and now, *Akeelah and the Bee*) have been produced here in Washington, D.C. at Arena Stage.

West is the recipient of D.C.’s Helen Hayes/Charles McArthur Award for Outstanding New Play and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, an international award for female playwrights.

FROM SCREENPLAY TO PLAY

Cheryl L. West’s interest in Akeelah’s story started in a movie theater. Her daughters loved the 2006 film of the same name and the way Akeelah would spell “prestidigitation.” Because the film meant so much to her children, West decided to take on the challenge of adapting the story for the stage. “You want to keep the integrity of the movie,” West said, “but you want to look at it in a different context.”

This meant revisiting the plot and making alterations. Those familiar with the film may notice that Akeelah’s neighborhood has moved from L.A. to the South Side of Chicago.

Of its new Chicago setting West said, “Children are trying to be children in the midst of violence... There are also people who want to save their communities.” West felt that the sense of community found in an Akeelah’s apartment complex made for a perfect setting to tell the story and highlight these issues.

The stage production features a brand new score composed by Victor Zupanc. Director Charles Randolph-Wright could not be

more excited by these updates and connects to Akeelah’s quest to fulfill her potential.

“I was very fortunate because my family — especially my mother — gave me permission to dream, and to dream big,” said Randolph-Wright. “That was quite a task for a young kid from rural South Carolina, but I believed in them. Akeelah is given a similar task of following her dreams, which unfortunately means following your fears.”

True to the original film, the play showcases a stellar cast of young artists, featuring five high school students. One of the actors, Molly Yeselson, who is from D.C., attended Camp Arena Stage and participated in Arena’s Voices of Now program. “We have a phenomenal cast,” said West. “They have amazed me.”

While adaptation may reinvent the context of Akeelah’s story, the heart remains the same. Randolph-Wright remarked, “I am so very proud when I realize that people (and not just young audiences) will watch this play and hopefully be moved and inspired to make a difference.”



Akeelah (far left) competing in the District Bee in Cheryl L. West’s adaptation. Photo by Dan Norman.

THE ULTIMATE AKEELAH SPELLING CHALLENGE

Do you think you can match Akeelah’s ability to S-P-E-L-L? Visit blog.arenastage.org and have a friend quiz you on all of the gigantic words featured in the play!

THE SCRIPPS NATIONAL SPELLING BEE

Frank Neuhauser won the first ever National Spelling Bee with the word “gladiolus” in 1925. Nine local newspapers banded together to host the event. In 1941, the E.W. Scripps Company became the contest’s official sponsor and provided name we now know. In 1925, Neuhauser only had nine fellow competitors. Today, 11 million students are expected to compete in 2015-2016 at the different levels of competition.

Spelling bees have become a national obsession, and not just for student spellers. Since the documentary *Spellbound* premiered in 2002, audiences have been captivated by the race to win the Scripps National Spelling Bee. The final round now airs on ESPN in primetime for viewers across the world. It takes place at the National Harbor, near Washington, D.C.

BEE HISTORY, 1926:



President Coolidge (center) with the finalists of the 1926 National Spelling Bee. (National Photo Company Collection, Library of Congress)



Spelling bee participants need to be in 8th grade or lower, younger than 16 years old and enrolled in a participating school. Spellers who advance to higher rounds are sponsored by daily and weekly newspapers. The winner of the Scripps National Spelling Bee receives a cash prize of over \$35,000, an engraved trophy and a number of reference works.

WINNING WORDS

2015
Nunatak &
Scherenschnitte

2014
Stichomythia
& Feuilleton

2013
Knaidel

2012
Guetapens

2011
Cymotrichous

2010
Stromuhr

The meaning of “bee” in spelling bee, refers to a gathering of people working towards a common goal — just like bees in a bee hive.



Akeelah prepares to spell her word. She is wearing her contestant number. Photo by Dan Norman.

HOW TO BE IN THE BEE

A spelling bee is a competition that tests your knowledge of spelling. When you win your school spelling bee, you advance to the District, State and National Bees.

Want to be a contestant in a spelling bee? Or hold one yourself? Here are some rules to know:

- A judge selects a vocabulary term and reads the term aloud.
- To start, you must repeat the word. Then, spell the word letter by letter. To show the judge that you are done spelling, repeat the word one more time.
- Contestants are allowed to ask for a definition or the language of origin before spelling the word.
- If you get mixed up while spelling, you are allowed to restart. The only catch is that you cannot change any of the letters you have already said.
- No writing is allowed, but several contestants invent different techniques to help them spell. Look for these as you watch the play.
- If the judge says, "That is correct," you move on to the next round. If you hear the sound of a bell, you have been eliminated.



ACTIVITY

Hold a spelling bee with your family, friends or class using the rules listed above. Here are some first-round words to start your vocabulary list:

Announcer	Community	Doctor	Principal
Challenge	Courage	Friend	Success
Chicago	Neighbor		

THREE BIG QUESTIONS

1

How can you overcome fear to achieve a goal?

2

What influence can family and community have on a person?

3

Why are words important?

HELPFUL HINTS FOR THEATER AUDIENCES

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

- Arrive at least 15 minutes early.
- Visit the restroom before the show starts.
- Sit in the exact seat on your ticket. Ask the usher for help finding it.
- Before the show begins, turn off your phone, watch alarms and any other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, turn it off immediately.
- Do not use your phone for texts, calls, games or pictures.
- You cannot take pictures or make recordings in the theater, even before or after the play.
- There is no food allowed in the theater.
- Do not talk, whisper, sing or hum, unless invited by the performers to do so.
- Keep your feet on the floor and off the seat in front of you.
- Avoid getting up during a show. If you must leave, wait for a scene change and exit quietly and quickly.
- Respond to the show; you can laugh, cry and gasp. However, don't repeat lines out loud or talk to the performers on stage.
- Be sure to applaud at the end!

RESOURCES

Scripps National Spelling Bee
<http://spellingbee.com/>

Spell It!
<http://myspellit.com/index.html>

Children's Theatre Company
Akeelah and the Bee Audience Guide

Film: *Akeelah and the Bee* (2006)

Film: *Spellbound* (2002)



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