

# arena's page

student study guide

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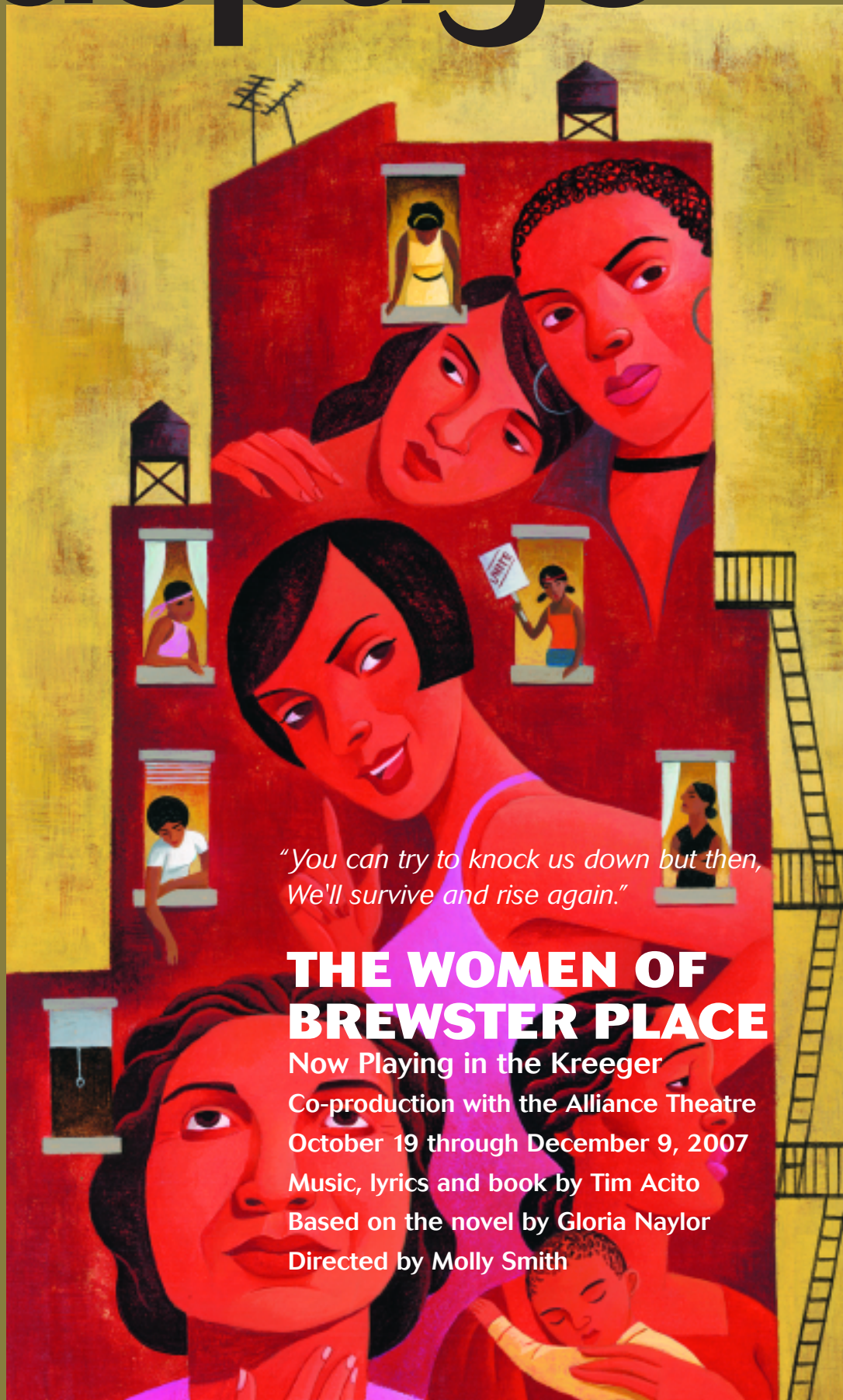
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## the play

Where do you go when life shatters your dreams? For ten women, the answer is the housing projects on Brewster Place. In the bleak Brewster Place development, they each fight their own battles—for their children, their lovers and their rights. Lesbians **Lorraine** and **Tee** face discrimination; mothers **Cora Lee** and **Luciella** struggle to care for their children; **Kiswana Browne** pursues social justice while **Etta Mae** hunts for a man. They all rely on the steadfast **Mattie** for support while she, in turn, waits for her long-lost son. Strengthened by their loyalty to one another, these women strive to keep hope alive and build a brighter future that will enable them to leave Brewster Place behind for good.



*"You can try to knock us down but then,  
We'll survive and rise again."*

## THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

Now Playing in the Kreeger

Co-production with the Alliance Theatre

October 19 through December 9, 2007

Music, lyrics and book by Tim Acito

Based on the novel by Gloria Naylor

Directed by Molly Smith

## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT



### Composer & Lyricist— **Tim Acito**

Tim Acito began his career in the performing arts as a dancer. But while touring the United States with such companies as the dance/theater troupe MOMIX and the American Repertory Ballet Company, Acito discovered his love of writing. He wrote a play and was accepted to the Yale Master of Fine Arts program in Playwriting.

His musical, *Zanna Don't*, about a world where being homosexual is “normal” while heterosexuality is taboo, was noticed by a producer in a small cabaret theater and then moved Off Broadway. There, it was nominated for three awards. Since this breakthrough success, Acito has been working on a number of projects, including an animated puppet musical with roots in 1980s rock.

# CHARACTERS AT A GLANCE

All the characters in the play are residents of the housing project at Brewster Place.



Photos by Greg Mooney, courtesy of the Alliance Theatre

**Etta Mae**— a spirited and humorous woman who keeps finding herself in Brewster Place when her husband-snaring schemes fall through

**Mattie**— a rock for the residents of Brewster Place whose support holds her neighbors and family together as she waits for the return of her son, Basil

**Lucielia**— Mattie’s niece and mother of Serena, she and her husband struggle to support their daughter

**Cora Lee**— the neglectful mother of a brood of children, who comes to realize the importance of being a guiding force in their lives

**Kiswana**— an idealistic young woman who encourages the residents of Brewster Place to join together in a **tenants’ association** to fight for their rights

**Lorraine**— a mild-tempered young teacher, whose relationship with Tee angers her judgmental neighbors

**Tee**— Lorraine’s lover, an outspoken lesbian who refuses to accept any mistreatment from the residents of Brewster Place

▣ **tenants’ association:** a group of concerned residents working toward better living conditions through strength in numbers

## A MIDSUMMER NIGHT’S DREAM



Shakespeare’s classic story of mixed-up lovers and fairy power struggles is a prominent part of *The Women of Brewster Place*. A performance of this play leads to the climax of the first act, and the characters plan another production in the second act as a fundraiser. Shakespeare’s play shares many themes with *The Women of Brewster Place*—it even has its own play-within-a-play! *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is a symbol of hope in the play. Tim Acito adapts the play’s dialogue into lyrics that reflect a message of joy and magic, drawing his words from every part of Shakespeare’s text.



*Activity! Consider this: What powers does live theater have? Why do people attend plays? How might seeing a performance influence the characters in the play? What is the power of theater and art in your life?*

# MAKING A NOVEL INTO A MUSICAL

**T**he *Women of Brewster Place* began as a novel by Gloria Naylor. This production is its world premiere as a musical.

How did it change as it went from one medium (mode of expression, like film, painting, or the written word) to another?

## Tools of the Trade

### NOVEL

dialogue  
description  
reader's imagination  
internal monologues  
about 300 pages in length

### MUSICAL

dialogue (spoken or sung)  
setting and stage directions  
stage with actors  
songs  
about 2 hours in length

## From the Playwright's Notebook

"I think the biggest challenge overall has been to stay as true as possible to Gloria Naylor's marvelous writing while also transforming it to serve the peculiar requirements of musical theater. Just as a point of reference, there are approximately twenty times the number of words in the novel as there are in the musical, and our musical is still almost two and a half hours long. While we have out of necessity chosen to present only a few of the many themes in the novel, we hope to present those themes in an innovative, thrilling, and unforgettable manner." —Tim Acito



*Activity: One choice the playwright made in transforming the novel into a musical is that all the characters who are not women are invisible. Why might he make this choice? As you watch *The Women of Brewster Place*, determine how effective this choice is for you as an audience member.*

## Beloved Book to Blockbuster Musical

*The Women of Brewster Place* is not the first book to be adapted to a musical. Other books that have made it to Broadway stages include:

*Wicked* by Gregory Maguire  
*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker  
*Ragtime* by E.L. Doctorow  
*The Secret Garden* by Frances Hodgson Burnett  
*Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo  
*Mary Poppins* by P.L. Travers  
*Jane Eyre* by Charlotte Brontë



*Activity: What is your favorite book? How would you adapt it to be a play, movie or musical? Where and when would you set it? Who would star in it? What changes to the story might you make?*

# BURSTING INTO SONG

**N**ovelists reveal information about characters through internal monologues and paragraphs of description. Playwrights, on the other hand, have to show audiences through action and dialogue. In musical writing, playwrights have a whole new weapon in the battle for defining character: song. A song can express emotion, reveal personality, show why a person is making a choice or even allow two people to fall in love onstage!

Song lyrics are a lot like poems—they use techniques like rhyme and rhythm to evoke feelings with words.

However, songs are different from poems because music is key to conveying their messages. Music is often what makes us feel sad, happy or nervous—imagine watching a horror movie without the soundtrack. Most great songs from musicals are written using three essential ingredients: the verse, the chorus and the bridge.



*Activity! Write your own lyrics, using the tune and rhyme scheme of a song you already know.*

Diagram of "Kiswana Browne" from *The Women of Brewster Place*

The future is upon us.  
You can feel it in the air.  
The revolution's 'bout to blow,  
So the world better prepare.  
I'm gonna lead an army of soldiers  
Spreading love and trust.  
Bringing peace to all the world  
By force, if I must.

So people come on, rise up,  
'Cuz it's time for us to get down.  
Come on now I'll show you how  
'Cuz I'm Kiswana Browne

The back-up singers  
will start to sway  
Singin',  
"Kiswana, won't you lead the way?"  
"OK," I say, "Here's what we're  
gonna do..."

Song verses move the song forward, telling its story. They usually have the same tune and rhyme scheme or pattern but not the same words.

The chorus is a repeated part of a song, sung after each verse. Like the verses, the chorus is sung to the same tune each time—unlike the verses, however, most of the words of the chorus remain the same.

The bridge usually falls between a verse and the chorus and introduces a new rhythm, rhyme scheme and melody, often carrying the song into a new key or musical range. The bridge from "Kiswana Browne" introduces a fantasy sequence with backup singers and dancers!

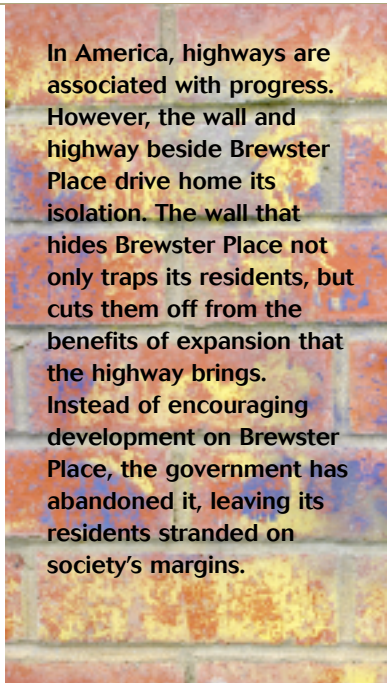
*"Don't help the poor, just hide them."*

—Lucielia, *The Women of Brewster Place*

## THE PROJECTS

**B**rewster Place offers homes to low-income families who cannot afford housing on their own. Run-down, unsightly, plagued by gang violence and drug use, and hidden from the outside world by a giant wall, Brewster Place symbolizes many of the worst problems of the projects, a more common term for public housing. Most of the people who live in Brewster Place do so because they have nowhere else to go.

Public housing in the United States began in its current form under President Roosevelt as part of his attempt to rebuild Americans' sense of security after the Great Depression. As housing became more affordable, families who could make payments on their own homes moved out of the projects. Now, in spite of laws passed to cut down on crime and violence in public housing, people working toward a better life for their families can still live alongside gangs, drugs and hopelessness.



In America, highways are associated with progress. However, the wall and highway beside Brewster Place drive home its isolation. The wall that hides Brewster Place not only traps its residents, but cuts them off from the benefits of expansion that the highway brings. Instead of encouraging development on Brewster Place, the government has abandoned it, leaving its residents stranded on society's margins.



**Activity!** Consider this: What does the word "project" mean? What does the phrase "the projects" mean to you? How does the meaning change?



*The Women of Brewster Place* is a co-production between Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. and the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta, GA. A co-production allows two theaters to share the cost and artistic work of producing the same show, which is then performed at both theaters.

Photos by Greg Mooney, courtesy of the Alliance Theatre

## Additional Resources

### Books/Plays

*The Women of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor  
*The Men of Brewster Place* by Gloria Naylor  
*A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare

### Video

*The Women of Brewster Place*, starring Oprah Winfrey

### Web

US Department of Housing & Urban Development: [www.hud.gov](http://www.hud.gov)

Broadway: The American Musical: [www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway](http://www.pbs.org/wnet/broadway)

## 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 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

*Enjoy the show!*



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Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org) for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.

What inspired the playwright?

What happens during rehearsals?

Get a behind the scenes glimpse of *The Women of Brewster Place* by reading the Arena Stage Blog, online at

**[blog.arenastage.org](http://blog.arenastage.org)**