



a Wheelock Family Theatre Study Guide

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Synopsis of the Play

Eleven-year-old Akeelah Anderson wakes up crying to the sound of gunfire and sirens outside her bedroom window. Her mother rushes to comfort her. Gail, a strong woman who loves her children fiercely, is contending with a demanding work life and distracted with anxiety about the “pathway of failure” Akeelah’s brother Reggie seems to be following. It’s clear that they are both worried about Reggie, and that the gunshots carry a painful significance beyond the moment. He arrives safely and keeps Akeelah company as she tries to fall asleep. We learn that Akeelah’s and Reggie’s father is gone, and that wearing his hat is a source of comfort and strength for Akeelah; a reminder of happier times when the two spelled together.

In the morning, we meet Georgia, a flashy dresser and Akeelah’s best friend, as well as other neighbors in her 709 neighborhood of Chicago—Ruth, “a wig-wearing woman who always looks dressed for church or an upscale nightclub,” and Willie, the super, a kind-hearted yet slow-moving man. Akeelah and Georgia head to school, where Akeelah is assailed by her “biggest tormentor” Rhonda and spends a difficult day competing in the Southside School Spelling Bee. Akeelah excels at spelling—and wins the bee—but is mocked by the other students for her achievement. Principal Welch encourages her to compete in the district bee next month. He tells Akeelah that he is trying to change the culture of the school, but Akeelah—embarrassed and angry about the other students’ laughter—asks him, “Why would I want to represent a school that don’t even have decent doors on the toilet stalls? That don’t even have books from this century?”

Dr. Larabee, a retired English professor, who arrived during the bee and tested Akeelah with a series of difficult words, believes she has potential. He offers to coach her. Akeelah is dubious about continuing to compete but agrees to watch the videotape Principal Welch gives her showing last year’s spelling bee. As she watches the tape, her resolve to compete is galvanized when she sees the masterful arrogance of the winner, Dylan Chiu. She decides to accept Dr. Larabee’s offer.

Their first meeting does not go well. He finds Akeelah undisciplined and rude; his cold, uncompromising manner rubs her the wrong way, and she storms out. She’ll prepare for the district bee herself. Akeelah seeks support from Gail, who is too tired and too worried about Reggie to be able to focus.

At the district spelling bee, Akeelah is befriended by fellow-speller Javier—a gregarious kid with a preppy style—and meets other students from their school, Barrington Academy, including her nemesis Dylan. At the competition, she is embarrassed by the noisy arrival of her brother Reggie pushing his child in a stroller. The baby frets, Reggie pulls out squeaky toys to amuse it, and shouts encouragement: “You know what daddy would say, put some stank-stank on it.” Despite the chaos of his presence, Reggie spots a girl cheating in the final round and calls her out. This gives Akeelah, who had been eliminated by misspelling “synecdoche,” a second chance. She spells “noctambulist” correctly and will go on to the State Finals in December.

Javier invites Akeelah to join the Spelling Club at Barrington Academy. And she has another prickly encounter with Dr. Larabee.

Akeelah tries to tell Gail her big news, but Gail is distracted by her sick grandchild and doesn't have time to take it in—or sign the consent form for Akeelah to participate. And she is becoming more and more worried about Reggie, who seems to be working for neighborhood criminal JT.

Georgia and Akeelah are invited to Javier's birthday party and make their way to his house by themselves. They are awed by the size of the place and the quiet. "No horns, no sirens, no screaming. It's just like their school. They got everything." Javier welcomes them warmly, but the girls—especially Georgia, who is not a speller—feel out of place in the unfamiliar surroundings. Akeelah encounters Dylan again and nearly beats him at Scrabble. She also meets Dylan's father, an intimidating man who obviously places enormous pressure on his son to succeed. When the girls get home—late—they are in big trouble. Gail tells Akeelah that she's going to have to go to summer school. No more thinking about spelling bees.

Akeelah, however, returns to Dr. Larabee without telling Gail. They begin to work together, and come to appreciate each other more as they work. The training becomes more intense – even physical, when Dr. Larabee discovers that Akeelah's focus improves when she moves. He has her jump rope and feeds her nutritious snacks (which she does not particularly like). Akeelah finds a deep coldness in him, and she begins to suspect she knows its source. Around Thanksgiving, the anniversary of her father's death, she and Dr. Larabee have a difficult conversation about loss. He tells her that he's not sure he'll be able to continue coaching her—but he believes she's ready for the state bee. Akeelah forges the state bee consent form, signing her father's name.

She goes to the state bee, alone—Gail doesn't know she's going; Georgia, feeling neglected, refuses to accompany her. Dr. Larabee arrives, as does, surprisingly, Gail—who had heard the news about Akeelah on the radio. Gail enters dramatically from the back and pulls Akeelah off the stage, while Javier stalls so that she does not lose her place in the bee. Dr. Larabee and Principal Welch persuade Gail to let Akeelah continue. She, Dylan, and Javier win and will go on to represent Illinois in the Nationals.

When Gail and Akeelah get home, they discover that Reggie has been arrested and is now in jail. No one knows what happened, but Akeelah has a hunch. (Reggie had told her that she needed better clothes if she was going to be competing in bees, and that he was going to figure out a way to get them for her.) She goes to share her worries with Dr. Larabee, but he obviously has worries of his own. He tells her that her problems can't be his problems, and he resigns as her coach.

A month later, and Akeelah is feeling sad and defeated. She tells Gail that she is tired of losing people—"First daddy dying, now Reggie's in jail, Georgia doesn't want to be my friend anymore and then all of a sudden Dr. Larabee told me to stay away, that he didn't want to be my

teacher.” Gail produces the 5,000 flashcards Dr. Larabee had prepared for Akeelah, as well as the jump rope, and tells Akeelah that when she had gone to pick them up he had told her, “One thing about teachers, they’re everywhere.” And so they are. All the neighbors pitch in to help Akeelah train—Ruth and Willie take shifts, Georgia returns to help, even Rhonda stops bullying and rallies, and the Spelling Club begins meeting at Akeelah’s house. Even the troubling JT lends a hand, challenging Akeelah with the word “sanguinary.”

After reuniting with Dr. Larabee, Akeelah goes to Washington, DC (wearing a Georgia-designed dress) with her entire entourage—including Reggie, who has been released from detention. After all the other competitors are eliminated, only Dylan and Akeelah remain. During a break, Akeelah overhears Dylan’s father harshly pressuring him to win—and revealing some of his own painful motivation for pushing his son so hard. Akeelah deliberately tries to lose so that Dylan can win. Dylan sees what she is doing—and deliberately misspells a word himself. The two then unite, determined to win the championship together. Dylan earns his share by spelling “vitrophyre.” Akeelah spells the last word—“triskaidekaphobia”—and the two are declared co-champions amidst great celebration.

About the Film

“[It’s about] a kid who learns what she’s good at, becomes proud of that and doesn’t want to hide it anymore. It’s overcoming the fear of being great, before you can be great.”

---Doug Atchison, *Akeelah and the Bee Production Notes*

Akeelah and the Bee, written and directed by Doug Atchison, was released in the United States in 2006. Part of his inspiration for the film came from what he saw and heard while working at a youth center in South Los Angeles, including what people would sometimes say about children who were doing well in school—that they were “acting white.” Atchison wanted his film to show what can cause these young people to doubt their own abilities. He has said, “It’s about this girl’s insecurity about doing a thing that she hasn’t seen people who look like her doing.”



It took Atchison a decade to develop the film. He came up with the initial concept after seeing the 1994 Scripps National Spelling Bee and noting that a majority of the competitors came from

good socioeconomic backgrounds. He set the story of Akeelah Anderson in a neighborhood in Los Angeles. Akeelah goes to a public school and faces issues with stigma and esteem and taunting by her schoolmates. With hard work, determination, and the help of her coach and community, she earns her way to the national bee. Atchison wrote *Akeelah and the Bee* as an inspirational story that shows how people can overcome obstacles. The film also shows how communities band together. Atchison created the project for all generations—“but particularly for kids of color to see a little black girl who does something powerful.”

Akeelah and the Bee was positively received by audiences and critics. Most reviewers praised the strong performances of the cast (Keke Palmer as Akeelah, Laurence Fishburne as Dr. Larabee, and Angela Bassett as Akeelah’s mother) and the uplifting story line. While the author tried to avoid stereotypes, especially the way African-Americans are commonly portrayed in Hollywood films, others felt the film reinforced some clichés and did not favorably portray Asian-American characters.

About the Playwright

Cheryl L. West was born and raised in Markham, Illinois. She became a teacher and a social worker in Chicago. Her students and community members’ stories have been the inspiration for many of the characters in her plays, and in the last two decades has built up an impressive canon of works, including *Mwindo*, *Lizzie Bright and the Buckminster Boy*, *Addy: American Girl Story*, and *Pullman Porter Blues*. 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. Recently, West received a playwriting award from the National Alliance for Theatre Education in July 2016 for *Akeelah and the Bee*.



West became interested in Akeelah’s story because her daughters love the film. When she adapted the story for the stage, she made some alterations to the plot. In her play, Akeelah’s neighborhood is not in LA but in the South Side of Chicago. Children live in the midst of violence but continue to believe in their community and want to save it. Akeelah wants to follow her dreams, but she also needs to face her fears. West wrote the play with the hope that it would inspire others.

***Akeelah and the Bee* Playwright Cheryl West in Conversation**

Playwright Cheryl West [CW] spoke with Elissa Adams [EA], Director of New Play Development at Children's Theatre Company (CTC), about her adaptation of *Akeelah and the Bee*.

EA: The film *Akeelah and the Bee* is set in LA. You chose to set the play in Chicago. Why?

CW: LA is a very sprawling, horizontal city, which is great for a movie because you can move from location to location, but I really wanted to see the whole of Akeelah's neighborhood onstage. Chicago is a very vertical city, full of apartment buildings where people live in close proximity to each other. It's congested, clamorous, and chaotic. At the start of the play, Akeelah doesn't appreciate her neighborhood. She doesn't feel safe. Unfortunately, this is true for many children who live in Chicago today. Chicago is considered the murder capital of the country right now. More than 200 murders have happened there just this year. More than 1700 people have been shot and wounded to date. Imagine hearing gun shots constantly, what that must do to a child's psyche and how that must contribute to children like Akeelah feeling under siege in their own neighborhoods. At the same time, I spent part of my childhood living in Chicago in a neighborhood not unlike Akeelah's and one of my strongest memories is that there were always adults around watching out for us kids. Neighbors, teachers, mentors who said, through their actions and their care, "I see you. I'm going to help you be your best, glorious self." I know those people are still in neighborhoods in Chicago, in Minneapolis, everywhere, and that's what helps children not only survive but thrive.

EA: Are there aspects of Akeelah that remind you of yourself when you were Akeelah's age?

CW: I come from a family where education was so valued. Having good grades, being well-spoken, was a sign of family pride. My grandparents had little education but were wise beyond measure. Yet they knew education was the ticket to empowerment and a way to continue the legacy of the family. I was a good student and the message was always, "keep going!" And yet, like Akeelah, there was a period of time when I retreated from the gift of my intelligence and my love of books and learning. In 6th grade, I moved to a new school in the middle of the school year, which is never easy! On the first day, the teacher asked me to read aloud in front of everyone. I took great pride in being a good reader and I remember feeling proud that I hadn't stumbled. But, at recess that day, while I was standing there hoping someone would ask me to play, a boy kicked me in the back and said, "that's what you get for thinking you're smarter than everyone." In the play, Akeelah can be snappy, angry, and sometimes unreasonable. I think this comes from being afraid to let her light shine and her gifts show. Over the course of the play, with help from people who believe in her – like Principal Welch, Dr. Larabee, her friends Georgia and Javier, her brother Reggie – Akeelah learns to let that light shine and, in doing so, helps everyone around her to let their lights shine, too.

CW: Can I tell you an African saying that keeps coming to me as I think about this play?

EA: Yes! Please do!

CW: "If you want to preserve knowledge and enable it to travel through time, entrust it to children."

About WFT's Production

Akeelah and the Bee premiered at the Children's Theatre Company in Minneapolis in 2015. The production then moved to the Arena Stage in Washington, DC. Wheelock Family Theatre applied for the rights in late 2015, with the hope that we could open our 36th season with this play. We got our wish!

Each member of WFT's artistic team works on a different aspect of the production to contribute to telling the story and bringing the director's vision to life.

Meet the Director: Maura Tighe

Akeelah and the Bee marks Maura's directorial debut at WFT, and is a play that perfectly pairs her passions for social justice and theatre for young audiences. Maura is on the theatre faculty at the Boston Arts Academy. Previously she was the founder of a youth theatre education program on the South Shore and the owner of a casting company.

Meet the Costume Designer: Seth Bodie

Seth Bodie is a recent graduate of the Yale School of Drama. He has been costume and lighting designer for numerous productions in the Greater Boston area and currently works out of New York City. Most recently Seth helped design costumes for the musical *Finding Neverland* for both the Broadway run and the touring production.

Meet the Set Designer: James Williston

James first worked at WFT as an actor in 1997, and became the Theatre's Technical Director in 2005. He has created the sets for WFT's productions of *Peter Pan* (integrating the special equipment needed to make the characters fly) and *Seussical* (which included a corkscrew playground slide). James's design work for other local theatres includes the giant angel wings used in *Angels in America* at Boston Theatre Works.

Meet the Lighting Designer: Craig Zemsky

Craig has designed lights for several WFT productions, including *Where the Mountain Meets the Moon* and *A Year with Frog and Toad*. In addition to his design work, he serves as WFT's master electrician, responsible for the team of electricians who hang and focus the lights in the week before technical rehearsals begin. Craig is also an actor, who has performed in every state in the continental US—and, once, on WFT's stage, when he filled in at the last minute for an actor who had overslept!

Meet the Properties Designer: Marge Lusignan

Marge has been WFT's resident properties designer for almost 10 years. Recently she was featured in the *Boston Globe* series "Behind the Scenes." She loves every aspect of her work, whether it involves building the 10-foot dragon puppet for *Shrek the Musical*; designing the magic tricks (the cake that gets frosted, the table that collapses) in *Mary Poppins*; and making cookies, cookies, cookies, giant leaves, and the bee puppets in *A Year with Frog and Toad*.

Before You See the Production

- Q. Why is it called a spelling bee?
- A. 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.

All About the Bee

How do you prepare for a spelling 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 bee, then state bee, then the national bee.

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.

The Queen of the Bees: The Scripps Spelling Bee

1925: Frank Neuhauser beats 9 competitors to win the first ever National Spelling Bee with the word “gladiolus.”

1941: The E.W. Scripps Company becomes the contest’s official sponsor and provides the name we now know.

Today: About 11 million students compete 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.

The Scripps Spelling Bee Winning Words

2015: Nunatak and Scherenschnitte
2014: Stichomythia and Feuilletton
2013: Knaidel
2012: Guetapens
2011: Cymotrichous
2010: Stromuhr

- What do these words mean? Look them up and find out!

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 books.

After You See the Production

Many themes in *Akeelah and the Bee* offer rich possibilities for exploration: friendship; bullying; family and community; stereotypes. Use the following suggestions as ways into deeper discussion.

Friendship: Questions for Thinking and Discussing:

Akeelah and Georgia are best friends, but their relationship is tested by Akeelah's involvement in the bee.

- Why do you think Georgia was angry with Akeelah? Do you think she had a good reason to be upset? Why or why not?
- What does friendship mean to you?
- Do you have a "best" friend? What makes them "best"?
- Have you ever had a conflict with a friend? How did you resolve it?
- How do people make a friendship that lasts through changes in their lives?
- Do you think that Akeelah and Javier will continue to be friends? Will Akeelah and Dylan?
- Would you say that Dr. Larabee and Akeelah are friends? Why or why not?

Suggested Reading:

The New Girl ... and Me by Jacqui Robbins (K – 2nd)
The Invisible Boy by Trudy Ludwig (K – 3rd)
Each Kindness by Jacqueline Woodson (1st – 3rd)
A Handful of Stars by Cynthia Lord (4th – 6th)
Cliffhanger and Buried Alive! by Jacqueline Wilson (4th and up)
Diary of a Wimpy Kid by Jeff Kinney (4th and up)

Bullying: Questions for Thinking and Discussing:

Both Akeelah and Izzy are victims of cruel behavior in and out of school.

- What happens to people who are different? How are they treated?
- Why do you think bullies behave the way they do? Why does Rhonda make fun of Akeelah? What does it tell you about Rhonda?
- Rhonda ends up helping Akeelah study for the bee. What made her change? Do you find her change of heart believable? Why or why not?
- Izzy is not so much bullied as she is ignored. What happens to quiet kids? How was Izzy able to find her voice?
- Do you think the way Dylan treated Akeelah was bullying? What were his reasons for behaving the way he did? What made him change? Did you find his change believable?
- What do you do when you know someone who is being bullied? What do you do if you're being bullied?

Suggested Reading:

Desmond and the Very Mean Word: A Story of Forgiveness by Desmond Tutu and Douglas Abrams (K—3rd)

Crow Boy by Taro Yashima (1st—5th)

My Name Is Bilal by Asma Mobin-Uddin and Barbara Kiwak (3rd—5th)

The Liberation of Gabriel King by K. L. Going (4th—5th)

The Revealers by Doug Wilhelm (5th—7th)

Playground: A Mostly True Story of a Former Bully by Curtis “50 Cent” Jackson (6th—9th)

Families and Neighborhoods: Questions for Thinking and Discussing

Akeelah lives in a community that is both nurturing and dangerous—and very different from Javier's neighborhood.

- How does Akeelah cope with her living situation?
- What are her family's values that help hold them together?
- Who first taught Akeelah to spell? How does this relationship motivate her? How did Dylan's father motivate his son? Do you think this is a good way to motivate someone? Who motivates you?
- How do Akeelah and Georgia react when they visit Javier's house for the first time? Why is it easier for Akeelah to “fit in” there?
- Why is it a big deal that Javier's mother allows the Spelling Club to meet at Akeelah's house?
- Why do you think Akeelah's success was so important to her community? How did they help and support her?
- Do you know the people in your neighborhood? What could you do to find out more about them?

Suggested Reading:

Knock Knock: My Dad's Dream for Me by Daniel Beaty (K—2nd)

This Is the Rope: A Story from the Great Migration by Jacqueline Woodson (1st—4th)

The Great Wall of Lucy Wu by Wendy Wan Long Shang (3rd—6th)

Gone Crazy in Alabama by Rita Williams-Garcia (4th—6th)

Almost Home by Joan Bauer (4th—7th)

Dash by Kirby Larson (5th—7th)

Stereotyping: Questions for Thinking and Discussing

Some critiques of *Akeelah and the Bee* have focused on perceived character stereotypes. Use this opportunity to define, discuss, and debunk stereotypes.

- What is a stereotype?
- Do you see any of the characters in *Akeelah and the Bee* as stereotypes? If you don't, what makes them NOT stereotypes? If you do, what about them is stereotypical?
- What was the culture of Akeelah's neighborhood? What are the stereotypes of inner-city culture? What fit and what didn't?

Suggested Activities:

For older students:

- Brainstorm categories that are used at school to group people—"jocks," "brains," whatever is in current play. List each category on the board; then have students narrow that list down to five major categories.
- Write these major categories on five separate pieces of flip chart paper and post them around the room. Give the class 10-15 minutes to travel to each posted sheet and write down adjectives related to the category headings. Remind students that they should only add new descriptions to the list.
- When they are finished, ask students to take a moment and look at the adjectives that the class has generated under each group heading.

Discuss what was recorded:

- Do assumptions apply to everyone in a group?
- Do most people hold the same assumptions about a group? Why or why not?
- Do assumptions tell us anything definite about a categorized individual?
- How do assumptions affect your behavior toward others?

Take another look at the adjectives recorded and hold a class discussion around the following questions:

- Do these adjectives describe stereotypes? How can they be unfair or hurtful?

For younger students:

Younger children can be introduced to the concepts of categorizing, making assumptions, and stereotyping by exploring gender bias in the following ways:

- Brainstorm with students a list of adjectives that come to mind when they think of “boys” and when they think of “girls.”
- Work with students to define the word "assumption" and point to examples of assumptions from the student-generated lists for boys and girls.
- Have students write about a personal experience when an assumption was made about them because of gender.
- Students can then create a collage that combines the student-generated assumptions relating to gender, their own personal experiences, and related newspaper and magazine clippings.

Activities from Discovery Education, Discoveryeducation.com, created by Tara Brown-L'Bahy, anti-bias educator and Ph.D. candidate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Character Assumptions & Motivations

Ask students how they would describe the following characters from the play, matching the name of the character with an adjective that describes them by drawing a line between the words:

Akeelah	arrogant
Dr. Larabee	considerate
Dylan	loyal
Georgia	resilient
Javier	paternal

- Ask students to explain their choices.
- What is the antonym or opposite of each of the words above? Does it describe any of the character’s actions or behavior? How?

Suggested Activity:

- Generate a list of adjectives similar to those above—others might include shy, outgoing, confident, unhappy, scared, proud, angry, confused.
- Write each word on a notecard (the same word may be used more than once; duplicates will make the activity more interesting) and distribute the cards to the class.

- Ask students to physicalize the word on their cards, silently, as they move about the room, interacting with each other.
- Have the class guess the emotion or quality each student is portraying.

Discuss:

- Were you successful at guessing the word or not? What kind of right and wrong guesses did you make?
- How did you get information from other people?
- How did you perceive being perceived?

At different times in the story the characters display their emotions, or keep them hidden. What do you think these characters are feeling? What is motivating them to behave as they do?

- Why doesn't Akeelah want to participate in the bee at her middle school?
- What does Dr. Larabee tell Akeelah that he can't teach her anymore?
- Why doesn't Georgia want to go to Javier's birthday party?
- How did Akeelah's mother react when she learned about her spelling lessons?
- Why is it so important to Dylan's father that his son wins the spelling bee?
- Why did Javier stall during his turn at the spelling bee?

Word Pictures: Moving and Learning

Dr. Larabee discovers that Akeelah can maintain her focus best by moving around. He also tells her, "Words are pictures. Pictures of ideas."

Ask students:

- How do you learn best?
- In what situations do you find it most challenging to learn?

And try this exercise:

- Give the class an adjective or adverb from the play. Say it aloud, several times, and have students, with their eyes closed, listen to the sound and experience the word.
- On "go," have students—without thinking about it, eyes still closed—MOVE that word. Give them a few moments to discover their movement and to lock it in.
- Then, have students open their eyes, continuing to MOVE the word, and look around the room.

Discuss:

- What struck you about other people's choices?
- Did you feel as if you succeeded in making a picture of an idea?
- When you listen to someone, how much information do you get from nonverbal cues? Give examples, and think about specific scenes in the play when the nonverbal message and verbal message contradict each other.