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INSIDE OUT

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS



THE HOT WING KING

PULITZER
PRIZE WINNER

Illustration by Kyle Malone

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THE PLAYWRIGHT ON THE PLAY

“Hall had written the play as a tribute to her brother; she had never seen a story like his on stage before. ‘Seeing him navigate the southern world as a gay Black man, I have always wanted to tell some version of his story,’ she says.”

-from [Pulitzer winner Katori Hall: ‘I think of theatre as a church. It’s a sanctuary’](#) in *The Guardian*

“Luther Vandross is a musical icon for Black people and they know all the words, so I gave Black audience members a gift, something they could sing along to.”

-from [“Theater Is Church”](#) in *Havard Magazine*

“If I am telling the story about how Black people have been resilient in this country, I have to use the healing power of music because that is how we’ve been able to honor the mother tongue that was snatched away from us,” [Katori Hall] says. “With music we are able to retain some of how we communicate with each other.”

-from [“Theater Is Church”](#) in *Havard Magazine*

CHARACTER DESCRIPTIONS

CORDELL (40s) – The head chef of the clique. Recently emerged from the closet to cohabitate with Dwayne. In a not so former life, had a wife and two kids.

WAYNE (40s) – Might not be the head chef but is the head of the household. Has been a mentor to his struggling nephew for years. Holds resentment towards Cordell for taking so long to legitimize their relationship.

ISOM (30s) – New friend. Playlists include gospel and trap and that’s exactly how he talks. Met Cordell and Dwayne at church.

BIG CHARLES (40s) – Old friend. Met Cordell and Dwayne at the barbershop. Observant, laid-back. The Rock.

EVERETT “EJ” (16) – Dwayne’s nephew. Attends a private Jesuit high school on a basketball scholarship. In need of guidance and a new home.

TJ (35) – Everett’s father. A long-time dealer who is “about that life.” Struggles with teaching his son how to be a man, but unsure if Cordell and Dwayne can be good father figures to his son.

SHORT SYNOPSIS

On the eve of the annual Hot Wang Festival in Memphis, Tennessee, Cordell Crutchfield thinks he has finally found a recipe that will land him the coveted title of Hot Wang King. He has assembled a raucous team of sous chefs, comprised of his beau Dwayne and close friends Big Charles and Isom. The four-man team is cooking with plenty of spice and innuendo on prep night until a family emergency thrusts Dwayne’s troubled nephew into the mix. Tensions boil over into heated arguments — and one team member starts messing with Cordell’s secret sauce.

With the crown, prize money, and their relationship on the line, Cordell and Dwayne are forced to reckon with what it means to be a Black man, a father figure, and part of a loving family.

SCENE-BY-SCENE SYNOPSIS

Act One

Scene 1 – Cordell and his friends, Isom and Big Charles, prepare for tomorrow’s Hot Wang Festival. Dwayne comes home from work, and he and Cordell get to some romancing, but Dwayne is called back to the hotel that he manages. They argue about Cordell being unemployed. Cordell and Big Charles talk about Cordell’s ongoing divorce from his wife. TJ, Dwayne’s brother-in-law, rings the doorbell, asking if he’s seen his son Everett. TJ gives Cordell money for his son. TJ leaves and Dwayne comes back with Everett (“EJ”), who needs somewhere to stay. Dwayne and Cordell argue about it – this weekend is supposed to be about their friend group and hot wing team, the New Wing Order.

Scene 2 – Dwayne sets Everett up in the guest bedroom. EJ asks if he can live with him. Dwayne is hesitant but supportive. They talk about Dwayne’s sister, EJ’s mother, who they buried two years ago.

Scene 3 – The New Wing Order sings and dances to Luther Vandross. Cordell gives everyone tasks to prep for the wing contest. Dwayne asks him to include EJ as the spice guard, and Cordell reluctantly agrees. Big Charles tells the story of how Cordell and Dwayne met in his barbershop. Cordell reveals his new flavor invention, sure that it will bring them the prize. They practice their wing-making tasks to perfection. Impressed, EJ tells Cordell he should open a restaurant. Cordell and Dwayne argue about this. While the others are distracted by the basketball game on the TV, Isom makes a change to the recipe.

Scene 4 – Outside, EJ helps Cordell. They shoot hoops and talk about sexuality. EJ asks Cordell if he can live with him and Dwayne. Their conversation gets heated and EJ stalks off angrily into the night. Cordell and Dwayne fight about EJ, the bigger issues in their relationship, and the circumstances of Dwayne’s sister’s death.

Act Two

Scene 1 – It is the morning of the festival and contest. Cordell has been out all night looking for EJ. Isom gently tells Big Charles to talk to Cordell. They talk about Cordell and Dwayne’s relationship. Big Charles tells Cordell that he deserves love, and Cordell returns the sentiment. As the New Wing Order starts preparing for the festival, Dwayne discovers the wings are too hot. Isom’s secret alteration is found out. TJ shows up at the door looking for the money he gave his son. Dwayne tells the group he can’t go to the contest because of this family emergency.

Scene 2 – In the guest bedroom, TJ and Dwayne argue about if TJ is a good father. TJ worries that if EJ moves in with Dwayne, he’ll become gay. They argue about gayness and masculinity. Hearing this, Isom challenges TJ to the “Main Maine” challenge, where he has to eat five of the extra-extra-hot wings without drinking milk or water. TJ accepts and fails. EJ returns. The New Wing Order decides to bring the “Main Maine” challenge to the festival.

Scene 3 – In the guest bedroom, TJ and EJ talk about their relationship. Cordell decides to take EJ to the festival and leave Dwayne at the house with his brother. Dwayne and TJ reconcile over their grief.

Scene 4 – The New Wing Order returns from the festival, trophy in hand. EJ won the “Main Maine” challenge. Cordell crowns him the Hot Wing King. Everyone agrees that EJ can live with Dwayne and Cordell. Dwayne and Cordell apologize to each other, in love. The family plays basketball together.

PLAYWRIGHT BIO

Katori Hall is a Pulitzer Prize and Olivier Award-winning playwright and television creator/producer hailing from Memphis, Tennessee. A two-time Tony Award nominee, she won the 2021 Pulitzer Prize for Drama for her play, *The Hot Wing King*.

She is also the proud recipient of the Susan Smith Blackburn Award, Lark Play Development Center Playwrights of New York (PONY) Fellowship, two Lecompte du Nouy Prizes from Lincoln Center, Fellowship of Southern Writers Bryan Family Award in Drama, NYFA Fellowship, the Columbia University John Jay Award for Distinguished Professional Achievement, National Black Theatre’s August Wilson Playwriting Award, and the Lorraine Hansberry Playwriting Award.

OTHER PLAYS BY KATORI HALL

Hoodoo Love (2009) - A tale of love, magic, jealousy, and secrets. Toulou escapes from the Mississippi cotton fields in the 1930s to pursue her dream of singing the blues in Memphis. When she meets a rambling blues man, the notorious Ace of Spades, her dreams are realized in a way she could never have imagined. Written in vivid language that captures the blues.

The Mountaintop (2011) - A gripping reimagining of events the night before the assassination of the civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. On April 3, 1968, after delivering one of his most memorable speeches, an exhausted Dr. King retires to his room at the Lorraine Motel while a storm rages outside. When a mysterious stranger arrives with some surprising news, King is forced to confront his destiny and his legacy to his people.

Hurt Village (2013) - It’s the end of a long summer in Hurt Village, a housing project in Memphis, Tennessee. A government Hope Grant means relocation for many of the project’s residents, including Cookie, a 13-year-old aspiring rapper, along with her mother, Crank, and great-grandmother, Big Mama. As the family prepares to move, Cookie’s father, Buggy, unexpectedly returns from a tour of duty in Iraq. Ravaged by the war, Buggy struggles to find a position in his disintegrating community, along with a place in his daughter’s wounded heart.

Our Lady of Kibeho (2015) - In 1981, a village girl in Rwanda claims to see the Virgin Mary. She is denounced by her superiors and ostracized by her schoolmates—until impossible happenings begin to appear to all. Skepticism gives way to fear, causing upheaval in the school community and beyond. Based on real events, the play is an exploration of faith, doubt, and the power and consequences of both.

Children of Killers (2016) - The president of Rwanda is releasing the killers. Years after the Tutsi genocide, the perpetrators begin to trickle back into the countryside to be reunited with their villages. A trio of friends—born during the genocide’s bloody aftermath—prepare to meet the men who gave them life. But as the homecoming day draws closer, the young men are haunted by the sins of their fathers. Who can you become when violence is your inheritance?

TINA – The Tina Turner Musical (2018) - From humble beginnings in Nutbush, Tennessee, to her transformation into the global Queen of Rock ‘n’ Roll, Tina Turner didn’t just break the rules, she rewrote them. This new stage musical reveals the untold story of a woman who dared to defy the bounds of her age, gender and race.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Memphis, Tennessee

This play is set in playwright Katori Hall's hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis has the largest Black population in the state and played a prominent role in the African American Civil Rights Movement. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated there in 1968 after activities supporting a strike by the city's maintenance workers. The National Civil Rights Museum was established there. More specifically, these characters are in Midtown, a collection of neighborhoods to the east of downtown. Midtown is home to many cultural attractions, institutions of higher education, and iconic architecture. Midtown's many historic and notable neighborhoods have long contributed to establishing Memphis as a home to a thriving Black history and culture.

BIPOC LGBTQ+ Communities in Memphis

Hall wrote *The Hot Wing King* as an homage to her brother because of an immense lack of southern Black LGBTQ+ representation in the theatre. Memphis is known for being friendly to BIPOC LGBTQ+ communities and well as having a vibrant LGBTQ+ history. For example, Frances Thompson, who lived in Memphis, was a formerly enslaved Black transgender woman who became a significant figure in the post-Civil War South. She is one of the earliest known trans women to testify before Congress about the Memphis race riots of 1866 and helped galvanize support for the 14th Amendment, which provided Black Americans with citizenship rights and the promise of equal protection. In addition, in 1993, Memphis officially established its own Black Pride movement, led by activist Terrell Buckner.

Gender Representation and Stereotypes

The characters in the play grapple with big questions about what it means to be a man, a father, and a partner. Masculinity, "Toxic Masculinity," and stereotypes of "gender representation" are themes that are found throughout the play. Toxic Masculinity refers to aspects of masculinity that are socially destructive, such as misogyny, homophobia, and violent domination. Gender representation refers to how different genders are portrayed and depicted, encompassing roles, behaviors, and characteristics, and can be influenced by gender stereotypes and societal expectations.

Music

Soul, gospel, rhythm and blues, rock 'n' roll, and other genres of music have roots in Memphis. In the early 1900s, Beale Street attracted many Black musicians who birthed the blues and made the street famous. Music continues to be important to the culture and economy of Memphis.

The characters also reference the genres gospel, trap, gospel-trap, 90s quiet storm, and r&b. Gospel music is a genre of Christian music, often rooted in African American church (lyrics centered around Christian themes and worship) and music traditions (blues, jazz, and soul), and is characterized by strong vocals and harmonies. Trap music is a subgenre of hip-hop and rap, originating in the Southern United States, particularly Atlanta, characterized by heavy bass, fast hi-hat patterns, and gritty lyrics.

Gospel and trap were blended in the South to create gospel trap - a subgenre of Christian hip-hop that fuses the sounds and rhythms of trap music with Christian themes and messages, often focusing on faith, hope, and redemption.

In this play, one of the more iconic songs the characters sing is "Never Too Much" by Luther Vandross, a famous 80s/90s R&B/Soul singer, songwriter, and producer. Vandross, who never publicly confirmed his sexuality, was outed as gay by his friend Patti LaBelle after his death. LaBelle stated that he did not confirm nor deny his sexuality during his lifetime for numerous reasons, including concerns about losing his female heavy fan base and how his mother would respond to the information.

GLOSSARY

Cotton Connect - a Farmer Community Foundation that supports communities in rural areas, with its headquarters in Memphis, TN, focusing on enhancing health, hygiene, skills, education, and opportunity

Bossip - a slang term, a blend of "black" and "gossip"

Framily - a slang term, a blend of "friend" and "family"

Fucci - fake Gucci

Guap - a slang term for "money"

Plug - a drug dealer who supplies lesser drug dealers with their drugs

Quing - a nonbinary term for royalty

THE HOT WING KING

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITY

Pre-Performance Questions

1. What is your definition of family? What is the difference between the family you are born into and the one that you choose? What do families do for each other?
2. Do you have a hobby or interest that piques your curiosity? Does the quality of the hobby change if competition is involved?

Post-Performance Questions

1. How do the scenic elements of the set and lighting design create a sense of place? How do the other scenic elements of sound design and costume design also help to tell the story?
2. Who is the central character of this play, and why do you think the play focuses on their story?
3. How does this play comment on finding one's authentic self and identity?
4. How do the characters navigate the relationships in the play while keeping their own identity?
5. How would you describe the relationship between Cordell and Dwayne? What do we learn about their relationship as the story is told?
6. How would you describe the relationship between TJ and EJ? What is happening in their immediate family that is causing them to visit their extended family?
7. What does this play say about family and belonging to a family?
8. How do Big Charles and Isom fit into Cordell and Dwayne's lives? What do they contribute to the New Wing Order?
9. Why does Dwayne feel responsible for Everett? Why does he want to take him into his home? How does Cordell feel about this decision?
10. What is going to happen at next year's Hot Wang Festival?

Activity

Personal Narrative – A Family Story

1. Start with students, working individually, to craft a personal definition of the word, "family story." What are the indicators of a family story, and do we know why it is told?
2. Students write about a person (or an event) in their life that they are willing to share.
3. Students then interview a parent/caregiver or other adult for an example of a family story. Students identify and define the similarities and differences between their interviewee's definitions and their own personal definition within Step 1.
4. Students then ask the subject of the interview to describe a family story that they are willing to share. Why is this story important? What obstacles were in their way? Are there any additional details they would like to add? Students look for the similarities and differences between the adult experience and their experience within Step 2.
5. After the interview, identify key themes and character choices that they will adapt into a monologue or scene of dialogue for the stage.
6. After writing the first draft, have students read the draft aloud.
7. Discuss the differences between theatrical adaptations. What did the playwrights do to convey the characters and the family story? Were there embellishments that may have been included?
8. Ask the playwright, in what ways did they have to invent, delete, or change anything within the source material for the monologue or dialogue?
9. Raising the bar: Following the first theatrical adaptation, instruct the playwrights to change a point of view. What changes would have to be made to clearly show that the events found in the first draft are now being described from a different character's perspective?

Writing PG: Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes.

Writing PG: Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail.

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