

from the FOOTLIGHTS

FEBRUARY 2013

"Life shouldn't be all work and no plays." <http://www.footlightsdc.org>

Footlights to Discuss Danai Gurira's *The Convert* on Tuesday, February 26 at Alfio's

If one Googles "Zimbabwe" to learn about this featured country in our next play for discussion—*The Convert* by **Danai Gurira**—among the retrieved items is an article dated January 21, 2013 in the Miami Herald: "Blast at N'anaga's House Kills Five." The home belonged to a Mr. Chinwadzimba who was among those who perished in the explosion. Described by his nephew as having supernatural powers, Chinwadzimba had a mermaid spirit, having been trained by one as a boy. A week later, after a re-enactment of the mysterious Chitungwiza explosion, a traditional healer and survivor of the blast claimed the tragedy occurred during a cleansing ceremony in which an imported goblin was beheaded. The survivor, Ms Clara Banda, said the blast occurred soon after her counterpart, 24-year-old Speakmore Mandere, beheaded the goblin. The official word, however, was that someone in the house was trying to extract red mercury for use in building land mines.

Today witchcraft remains an integral part of Zimbabwean culture. In the 1890s, European colonialism offered Zimbabweans the Christian path to salvation. A query, then: Is it possible to abandon the "bonds" of religion and ritual inculcated over centuries and accept a new path?

Set in 1895 amid the colonial scramble for Southern Africa, *The Convert* follows Jekesai, a young girl who escapes village life and a forced marriage arrangement, ultimately discovering Christianity under the guidance of an African teacher. However, as anti-colonial sentiments rise to a boiling point, Jekesai must choose between her new European God and the spirits of her ancestors. "Intense and deeply affecting" (*Chicago Tribune*), *The Convert* examines complex cultural and religious collisions that shaped the post-colonial world, the reverberations of which are still felt in Zimbabwe today.

The Convert, the first of a trilogy and supported by the National Endowment for the Arts Art Works grant, was commissioned by Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles and will explore Zimbabwe's coming-of-age from a female perspective. In 2012, the premiere production—a co-production between the McCarter Theatre in Princeton, NJ, the Goodman Theatre in Chicago, IL, and the Center Theatre Group in Los Angeles, CA—received the Edgerton New American Play Award, The Stavis Award, and six Ovation awards. Woolly Mammoth

received a National Endowment for the Arts New Play Development grant to support the creation of the final play focused on twenty-first century Zimbabwe. Woolly Mammoth's 2013 production of *The Convert* runs from February 13 – March 10.

Danai Gurira is an award-winning playwright and stage and television actress. Ms. Gurira co-created and performed in the award-winning two-woman play, *In The Continuum*, which premiered off-Broadway and toured the US and Southern Africa. For her work in that production, Danai won a 2006 Obie Award, the 2006 Outer Critics John Gassner Award, the 2004 Global Tolerance Award (Friends of the United Nations) and was honored by the Theatre Hall of Fame. She has also won the Whiting Award, Best Playwright with NAACP, and her play *Eclipsed*, which appeared at Woolly in 2009, won Best New Play at the Helen Hayes Awards. She is the recipient of the 2008 TCG New Generations Program travel grant for *Eclipsed* and has taught playwriting and acting in Ubeira, Zimbabwe, and South Africa. She received her MFA in acting from New York University and was a Hodder Fellow at Princeton University. Danai was born in the US to Zimbabwean parents and raised in Zimbabwe. Currently, Danai can be seen as Michonne in the award-winning AMC series, *The Walking Dead*.

"Woolly is proud to continue our association with playwright Danai Gurira and Woolly Company Director Michael John Garces," says Woolly Artistic Director Howard Shalwitz. "Danai's intensely personal new drama about the clash of native religion and Christianity in what is now known as Zimbabwe follows the brilliant successes of *In The Continuum* and *Eclipsed*. Heartrending and humorous, *The Convert* firmly establishes Danai as one of the finest playwrights in our global village."

Our Woolly Mammoth guests on Tuesday, February 26 are **John Baker**, Production Dramaturg for *The Convert* and Woolly's Literary Manager, and **Jecamiah Ybanez**, Assistant Dramaturg for *The Convert* and Assistant to the Artistic Director. Two *Convert* cast members will join us as well. Footlights new board member Stephanie Olshan will moderate our discussion.

We'll meet for our dinner-discussion at Alfio's Trattoria, located on the ground floor of the Willoughby Apartments, 4515 Willard Avenue in Chevy Chase,

Maryland. The restaurant is just two blocks from the Friendship Heights metro stop on the red line. Street parking is limited but valet parking is free at Alfio's if you drive. Dinner is at 6:30 and the discussion begins at 7:30 and usually ends around 9. Cost for dinner is just \$13, and that includes tax and tip, and for which you get salad, bread, choice among six entrees, ice cream, and coffee or tea. Cash or check, no credit cards, please. We appreciate a \$5 contribution to Footlights. Beer, wine, and cocktails are available from the bar. You may come for the discussion only if you wish.

Make reservations with Phyllis Bodin at 301-986-1768 or Phylbo@verizon.net. If you have to cancel, please let Phyllis know by noon on February 26, so that we have an accurate count for the restaurant. We may have to pay for no-shows.

Read *The Convert*. Copies of the rehearsal draft script are available for Footlights members to read in advance of the discussion. The document is not for further copying or distribution, please. To receive the free e-

script, e-mail robinlarkin@comcast.net or phone 240-669-6300. To request a printed copy, send your check for \$7.50, payable to Footlights, to Robin Larkin, 5800 Nicholson Lane, Apt. L07, Rockville, MD 20852. Please include your address.

See *The Convert*. Footlights will go to the Saturday, March 9, 3 p.m. matinee performance of *The Convert* at Woolly Mammoth Theatre, 641 D St, NW, Washington. A postshow cast discussion is scheduled. Our group ticket price is \$38. Reserve with Robin, robinlarkin@comcast.net or 240-669-6300. Send your check, payable to Footlights, to Robin Larkin, 5800 Nicholson Lane, Apt. L07, Rockville, MD 20852.

About Footlights

To learn more about Footlights, visit our website: <http://www.footlightsdc.org>. To subscribe to our e-list, go to <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/footlightsdc/join>, or e-mail footlightsdc-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

Calendar

- **Tuesday, February 26**, 6:30 p.m., dinner-discussion of **Danai Gurira's *The Convert***. Our guests are from Woolly Mammoth Theatre Company. At Alfio's, 4515 Willard Ave, Chevy Chase, MD 20815. Reserve with Phyllis Bodin, Phylbo@verizon.net or 301-986-1768.
- **Saturday, March 9**, 3 p.m., performance of ***The Convert*** at Woolly Mammoth Theatre, 641 D Street, NW, Washington, DC 20004. Tickets are \$38. Reserve with Robin, robinlarkin@comcast.net or 240-669-6300. Send checks, payable to Footlights, to Robin Larkin, 5800 Nicholson Lane, Apt. L07, Rockville, MD 20852.
- **February 10 - March 2**, performances of ***Black Comedy*** by **Peter Shaffer** at No Rules Theatre Company, Signature Theatre, 4200 Campbell Avenue, Arlington VA 22206. Postshow discussions are planned for matinees on February 10 and 17. See <http://www.goldstar.com/events/arlington-va/black-comedy> for discounted tickets. *Black Comedy* was our discussion play for January.

Robin Larkin for **FOOTLIGHTS**
5800 Nicholson Lane, Apt. L07
Rockville, MD 20852