

# Study Guide For Teachers

## TAHIRA in *Gift of Story*

Presented by

Young Audiences

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### ABOUT THE PROGRAM

In *Gift of Story*, TAHIRA introduces the audience to the Jali, or Jaliya (plural). The Jaliya are professionally trained oral historians whose job is to record history, transmit the history, and educate and focus societies on important lessons learned through these historical events. TAHIRA opens with an introduction of the call and response style of singing. "Call and response" is a requested or spontaneous verbal and non-verbal interaction between the storyteller and the audience. TAHIRA engages the students by first opening up a dialogue about the theme of the stories. *Gift of Story* emphasizes the role of stories and storytellers in the recording of historical events.

### LEARNING GOALS

Through stories and songs, TAHIRA will broaden students' knowledge about the history of the African American fight for freedom by telling of some of the enslaved Africans who lived, struggled and fought for freedom during the 350 years of captivity in the U.S. Her stories and songs will also enlighten students about the struggles of African Americans during the Civil Rights era.

### BACKGROUND INFORMATION FOR STUDENTS

The Jali tradition has been passed down for centuries in the present-day West African countries of Mali, Gambia, Guinea, Burkina Faso and Senegal. The Jaliya (or griots in French) are the embodiment of their countries' societal histories. In contrast to written literature, the African oral history is composed to be verbally performed, and is an integral part of spoken word performance, theater, dance and music. The Jaliya, through their public and private performances of story and music, transmit historical facts from one generation to the next.

In traditional African societies, some professions are primarily conditioned by family heritage. The Jaliya are one example of this tradition. Future historians are born, raised and imbued with the education and skills necessary to serve their societies. Other families in the societies employ the services of a Jali as a personal historian. The Jali spends much time with the employer families recording important events while at the same time passing the history and the job on to his or her children so that the history of the employer family stays alive for all times. Most importantly, the Jali ensures that the historical recordings of his or her employer are passed on to the future generation of that family through story and music performances at family gatherings.

One of the attributes of the Jali tradition that remains today is the respect for the Jali as a chronicler and competent commentator of social events. The Jali has retained the right to openly criticize all social classes. The freedom to criticize is unlimited, and his/her criticism is almost always accepted.

## BEFORE THE PROGRAM

1. Read several folktales with your class. If you can, include an Anansi story, a tall tale, and a story that explains natural phenomena, such as "Why Mosquitoes Buzz in People's Ears." Try to find two versions of the same story. Have the children listen and make comparisons.
2. Encourage students to tell— not read— a story with which they are familiar. Discuss the differences between telling and reading a story.
3. Have your children brainstorm what they think a storyteller might do to make a story interesting to an audience. Encourage them to watch and listen carefully during the performance to see what TAHIRA does to make the stories interesting and fun.
4. Many of the stories and songs that TAHIRA shares are passed down through the generations.
  - Discuss how cultural history and ethnic traditions are preserved within a family.
  - Ask students to share any stories, songs or special customs particular to their own families or culture.
  - Point out how the oral tradition plays a vital role in defining history and heritage.

## AFTER THE PROGRAM

1. Discuss the specific stories and songs in *Gift of Story* that held the students' attention most.
2. Ask students if any of the stories had lessons or left them with something to think about. Ask them to identify the stories and the lessons learned.
3. Ask how the performance would have been different if the storyteller had sat down and read the same stories.
4. Have students illustrate one of the stories heard.
5. Have your students think of a special message or lesson they would like to share, then create a story that illustrates that lesson and read it or tell it to the class. See if the class can guess the lesson or message before the student reveals it.
6. Make a story cloth. Have the students select a story of their choice. Students may draw or cut out construction paper figures that represent characters or aspects of the story selected. Sew or glue each figure on a large piece of burlap. Students can use the story cloth to retell the story to another class. Story cloths can be displayed.
7. Using a story from the performance or another of their choice, students may act out a story in the form of a skit or using puppets.

## VOCABULARY WORDS

**Jali/Jaliya:** Master storytellers/historians of West African countries, responsible for passing on the history and culture of their communities.

**Ancestors:** People who were part of your family or ethnic group before you were born to the family or group.

**Version:** A different way of telling a traditional or familiar story.

**Dilemma Tales:** Stories that present a problem that is then left to the audience to discuss before the outcome is told.

**Call and Response:** Traditional African singing style: one person sings a line and a chorus responds. A style of singing which has survived in African-American street games and choral singing.

**Talking drum:** Elongated drums with two heads held under the arm. Squeezing changes the pitch. These drums were once used to communicate. The drums imitate the human voice.

## ARTIST INFORMATION

TAHIRA is a multi-talented storyteller, relating African and African American stories while drawing upon her cultural background and personal experiences. She is filled with passion and enthusiasm for the content of her stories and their inherent cultural messages. Whether performing her original works, or her vast repertoire of stories from the African oral traditions, TAHIRA brings to her audiences messages of courage, hope and spiritual strength. Blending song, poetry and story, her high-energy performance delights listeners of all ages. TAHIRA is an advocate of using the arts to bring about social change. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from Temple University's School of Communication and Theatre. She was awarded a fellowship from the Delaware Division of the Arts for her significant contribution to oral literature. TAHIRA is the Past-President of Keepers of the Culture, a Philadelphia Afro-centric storytelling group, and a member of the National Association of Black Storytellers, the National Storytelling Association and Patchwork: A Storytelling Guild.

## RESOURCES

### REPERTOIRE

*A Story, A Story.* An original son by TAHIRA.  
*Signifying Monkey.* Sto'etry by Oscar Brown, Jr.  
*Strange Animals.* West African Folktale adapted by TAHIRA  
*Jealous Farmer.* Sto'etry by Mitch Capel  
*Sunu.* Traditional song from Guinea, West Africa  
*Will You Share Your Light.* Original song/poem by TAHIRA

### BOOKS

*Talk that Talk: An Anthology of African-American Storytelling.* Marian Barnes  
*Jump Up and Say.* Linda and Clay Goss  
*A Treasury of African Folklore.* Harold Courlander

### Recordings

*Rise to Freedom* by TAHIRA & *Gifted Children* by TAHIRA