

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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CONTACT:**Arena Stage**Anastasia St. Hilaire, asthilaire@arenastage.org**Print Shop PR**Nicole Capatasto, nicole@printshoppr.com**ARENA STAGE ANNOUNCES CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM FOR
TONY AWARD-WINNING BROADWAY SENSATION****JAJA'S AFRICAN HAIR BRAIDING**

By JOCELYN BIOH

Directed by WHITNEY WHITE

A Co-Production with BERKELEY REPERTORY THEATRE
and CHICAGO SHAKESPEARE THEATER

In Association with MADISON WELLS LIVE and LACHANZE

(Washington, D.C.) Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater announced today the cast and creative team for ***Jaja's African Hair Braiding***. Set in the pulsating heart of Harlem, **Jocelyn Bioh's** Tony Award-winning comedy will make its D.C. premiere in Arena Stage's **Kreeger Theater** this fall, directed by Tony nominee **Whitney White**. *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* will run **September 6 – October 13, 2024**. Press Night will be held on **Thursday, September 12**. For information and tickets, please visit arenastage.org/jajas.

"Kicking off my inaugural season at Arena Stage with a dynamic new production fresh from its Broadway run is exhilarating," said Arena Stage Artistic Director **Hana S. Sharif**. "*Jaja's African Hair Braiding* promises to have audiences laughing throughout. Opening with a comedic gem from a brilliant playwright like Jocelyn Bioh is a fantastic way to Dream Forward in our 2024/25 Season. Her work sparks conversation through humor and realism, inviting audiences to engage with the art while reflecting on their own lived experiences."

Jaja's African Hair Braiding twists comedy, community, and culture into a theater experience that is not to be missed. Audiences are invited to follow the uproarious escapades of a lively and eclectic group of West African immigrant hair braiders as they shape masterpieces on the heads of neighborhood women. A beautiful reflection of the ins, outs, and hustle of everyday life, this hilarious workplace satire unravels the complexities of cultural identity, assimilation, and the pursuit of the American Dream within the African immigrant community. During one sweltering summer day, love will blossom, dreams will flourish, and secrets will be revealed.

The cast will include **Melanie Brezill** (Broadway's *The Book of Mormon*) as Michelle/Chrissy/LaNiece, **Victoire Charles** (Broadway's *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*) as Jaja, **Yao Dogbe** (Round House Theatre's *Topdog/Underdog*) as James/Franklin/Olu/Eric, **Mia Ellis** (Trinity Repertory Company's *The Mountaintop*) as Jennifer, **Tiffany Renee Johnson** (Goodman Theatre's *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play*) as Aminata, **Colby N. Muhammad** (La Jolla Playhouse's *Love All*) as Vanessa/Sheila/Radia, **Jordan Rice**

(Ava DuVernay's *Selma*) as Marie, **Awa Sal Secka** (Signature Theatre's *Ragtime*) as Bea, **Aisha Sougou** (Marriott Theatre's *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*) as Ndidi, and **Bisserat Tseggai** (Soho Rep's *For All the Women Who Thought They Were Mad*) as Miriam. Understudies will be announced at a later date.

Tony nominee **White** (*Jaja's African Hair Braiding*) will be joined by the creative team from Manhattan Theatre Club's sold-out run, including three-time Tony-winning set designer **David Zinn** (Broadway's *Stereophonic*), the first Black woman to win a Tony Award for Best Costume Design of a Play **Dede Ayite** (*Jaja's African Hair Braiding*, Arena's *American Prophet*), Tony-nominated lighting designer **Jiyoun Chang** (*Stereophonic*, Arena's *Ride the Cyclone*), Tony-nominated original music and sound designer **Justin Ellington** (*Jaja's African Hair Braiding*), Tony-nominated video designer **Stefania Bulbarella** (*Jaja's African Hair Braiding*) and 2024 Special Tony Award-winning hair and wig designer **Nikiya Mathis** (*Jaja's African Hair Braiding*). This production will also include associate director **Manna-Symone Middlebrooks**, dialect and vocal coach **Yetunde Felix-Ukwu**, stage manager **Mandisa Reed**, and assistant stage manager **Jamie Berry**. Casting is by **Caparelliotis Casting**, **Kelly Gillespie**, and **Erica Hart**.

CAST BIOGRAPHIES (in alphabetical order)

Melanie Brezill (*Michelle/Chrissy/LaNiece*) is thrilled to be making her Arena Stage debut! Broadway and National Tour: *The Book of Mormon*, *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, *Mamma Mia!*. Select Regional *Stokely: The Unfinished Revolution, for colored girls...*, *Man in the Ring*, *Caroline, or Change* (Court Theatre); *Beautiful, Buddy: The Buddy Holly Story* (Marriott Theatre); *The Comedy of Errors at Shepperton*, *As You Like it* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater); *Nina Simone: Four Women* (Northlight Theatre); *Little Shop of Horrors* (Drury Lane Oakbrook Theatre); *Crowns* (Goodman Theatre); *The MLK Project* (Writers Theatre). TV/Film: *Reporting for Christmas*, *Empire*. Melanie is the creator of The Grandmother Project and Pearls & Pocketbooks series on YouTube. She would like to thank her family, friends, and Stewart Talent for their support! Instagram: @shinegirlshine, @thegrandmotherproject

Victoire Charles (*Jaja*) is making her Arena Stage debut. Theatre: *Golden Age* (MTC), *Ruined* (MTC, Intiman and Geffen Playhouse), *Moby Dick Rehearsed* and *The Tempest* (The Acting Company, Group 35), *Intimate Apparel* (Portland Stage Company), *The Trojan Women* (Alabama Shakespeare Festival), *The Comedy of Errors* (Shakespeare Theatre Company, DC). TV: *New Amsterdam* (NBC), *FBI* (CBS), *Pretty Little Liars: Original Sin* and the upcoming *Pretty Little Liars: Summer School* (MAX). Training: Fordham College at Lincoln Center and the NYU Grad Acting Program.

Yao Dogbe (*James/Franklin/Olu/Eric*) is overjoyed to be making his debut at Arena Stage. Select DC credits include *Topdog/Underdog*, *Nollywood Dreams*, *Ohio State Murders* (Round House Theatre) and *King Lear* (Shakespeare Theatre Company). Off-Broadway: *The Doctor* (Park Avenue Armory); *Nollywood Dreams* (MCC Theater). Regional: *Richard III*, *Twelfth Night*, *Measure for Measure*, *Macbeth* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater); *Fences* (American Players Theatre); *Fly* (Capital Repertory Theatre); *Intimate Apparel* (Northlight Theatre); *Routes* (Remy Bumppo Theatre Company); *Cymbeline* (Utah Shakespeare Festival). Tours: *Othello* (Montana Shakespeare in the Parks). Yao is a first-generation Ghanaian American actor and an activist for African cultural and dialectical authenticity on stage and film for the African diaspora. TV/Film: Yao currently has an AutoZone commercial nationwide. MFA Acting, University of Houston. Instagram: @yaonation

Mia Ellis (*Jennifer / u/s Michelle/Chrissy/LaNiece*) was born and raised in Mississippi where she attended Tougaloo College. She received her MFA in Acting from Brown University/Trinity Rep. Select Regional: *The Amen Corner* (Shakespeare Theatre Company); *Fairview*, *The Mountaintop*, *Intimate Apparel*, *Ragtime* (Trinity Rep); *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (Alabama Shakespeare Festival); *A Raisin in the Sun* (Seattle

Rep); *Hamlet* (Santa Cruz Shakespeare). TV/Film: *The Good Fight*, *Elementary*, *Person of Interest*, *Welcome to the Blumhouse Live*, *Louder Than Words*, *Lavender Men*. Mia is also a teaching artist, writer, producer, and a member of the Acting Company at Trinity Rep. She loves snow, classical music, animation, and sends a special thanks to Linda, Semoune, and L.B. Instagram: @ellismia09. Website: miaellis.com

Tiffany Renee Johnson (*Aminata*) is excited to make her Arena Stage debut! She's a proud Chicago native and Howard alum and is so glad to be back in DC. Some of Tiffany's favorite regional credits include *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (Remy Bumppo Theatre - Core Ensemble Member), *Chlorine Sky* (Steppenwolf Theatre), *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play* (Goodman Theatre), *Red Velvet* (Chicago Shakespeare Theater), *The Garbologists* (Northlight Theatre), and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (Writers Theatre). Her TV/film credits include *Shameless* and *The Chi* (Showtime); *Chicago PD* and *Chicago Med* (NBC); *Soundtrack* (Hulu); and *Range Runners* (Amazon Prime). When Tiffany is not acting, she's writing for film and speaking to students. She gives God all the glory. Instagram: @tiffanyreneej_ Website: TiffanyReneeJohnson.com

Colby N. Muhammad (*Vanessa/Sheila/Radia*) is more than thrilled to make her Arena Stage debut with *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*. Regional: *Love All* (La Jolla Playhouse), *Pride and Prejudice* (Chautauqua Theater Company). Educational Theatre: *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Promise*, *Everybody*, *In the Red and Brown Water*, *Anything Goes*, *Fabulation*, or *the Re-Education of Undine*. Education: MFA from UC San Diego. BFA from Howard University. Instagram: @colbynatasha Website: colbymuhammad.com

Jordan Rice (*Marie*) is an actress, filmmaker, and content creator from Atlanta, GA. At age 11, Jordan made audiences hold their breath in her film debut as the last little girl on the screen during the church bombing scene in Ava DuVernay's *Selma*. Her other notable TV/film work includes playing Jackie Carson in the Apple TV+ series *Swagger*, Dylan in *One True Loves*, and Esme in the DC Universe's *Doom Patrol*. Her creative work garnered her recognition as a 2020 YoungArts Theatre Finalist and Winner and a 2021 U.S. Presidential Scholar in the Arts Semifinalist. Jordan is thrilled to continue developing her artistry and expanding the artistic space for more artists of color in the future. To follow her journey, follow her on Instagram: @actressjordanrice #ThatGirlBeActing

Awa Sal Secka (*Bea*) is making her Arena Stage debut. Her credits include New York: *Goddess* workshop (Zawadi); *Grace* workshop (Jackie). Regional: *Goddess* (Grio) at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. Signature Theatre: *Gun and Powder* (Flo); *Blackbeard* (Kali Maa); *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Simon); *Broadway in the Park*; *Signature Vinyl*. Ford's Theatre: *Into the Woods* (Baker's Wife); *The Wiz* (Glinda/Dorothy u/s). Round House Theatre: *School Girls* (Ama); *Caroline, or Change* (Dottie). Theater J: *Intimate Apparel* (Mayme); *Gloria: A Life* (Flo Kennedy). Kennedy Center: *Me...Jane* (Maisie); *Chasing the Wind* (Abby). Imagination Stage: *Cinderella* (Cinderella); *Charlie Brown* (Lucy). ArtsCentric: *L5Y* (Cathy); *AIDA* (Aida); *Memphis* (Felicia). Center Stage: *Glorious World* (Lady 3). ATMTC: *James and the Giant Peach* (Sponge). Studio Theatre: *Silence! The Musical* (Ardelia). OTC: Co-writer of *The Joy That Carries You* (2023 Winner of the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play or Musical); *Dessa Rose* Concert (Dessa); *Children of Eden* Concert (Eve); *Avenue Q* (Ensemble).

Aisha Sougou (*Ndidi*) was born and raised in Greensboro, North Carolina, the daughter of Senegalese immigrants. She recently graduated from the School of Drama at the University of North Carolina School of the Arts, Class of 2023. Her recent credits include *Beehive*, *Beautiful: The Carole King Musical*, and *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!* (Marriott Theatre). Aisha dedicates this performance to her mother and sisters, who taught her anything and everything she knows about hair.

Bisserat Tseggai (*Miriam*) is an Eritrean-American actor whose work in theater includes *The Jungle* at St. Ann's Warehouse and The Curran Theatre, and *For All the Women Who Thought They Were Mad* at Soho Repertory Theatre. Her television credits include *The Accidental Wolf*, *Seven Seconds*, *Succession*, *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*, *Orange is the New Black*, *Billions*, *Alternatino With Arturo Castro*, *Luke Cage*, and *Rival Speak*. You can follow her @bisserat on all social media platforms.

PRODUCTION INFORMATION

Arena Stage

In a Co-Production with Berkeley Repertory Theatre and Chicago Shakespeare Theater

And in Association with Madison Wells Live and LaChanze

Presents

JAJA'S AFRICAN HAIR BRAIDING

By Jocelyn Bioh

Directed by Whitney White

In the Kreeger Theater | September 6 – October 13, 2024

"Bioh's braided world of teeth sucking, sideways comments and dance breaks is rapturous." — The Guardian

ABOUT: Step into the vibrant world of *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*, direct from Broadway. Set in the pulsating heart of Harlem, this comedic gem unravels the complexities of cultural identity, assimilation, and the pursuit of the American Dream within the African immigrant community. Follow the uproarious escapades of Marie, Bea, Miriam, Aminata, Ndidi, Jaja, and others as they navigate life and laughter in Jaja's bustling hair braiding salon. With humor as rich as its characters, this five-time Tony Award nominated production weaves hilarious moments with profound insights, celebrating the indomitable spirit and interconnectedness that define us all.

CAST:

Michelle/Chrissy/LaNiece: Melanie Brezill*

Jaja: Victoire Charles*

James/Franklin/Olu/Eric: Yao Dogbe*

Jennifer / u/s Michelle/Chrissy/LaNiece: Mia Ellis*

Aminata: Tiffany Renee Johnson*

Vanessa/Sheila/Radia: Colby N. Muhammad*

Marie: Jordan Rice*

Bea: Awa Sal Secka*

Ndidi: Aisha Sougou*

Miriam: Bisserat Tseggai*

CREATIVE:

Playwright: Jocelyn Bioh

Director: Whitney White

Set Designer: David Zinn

Costume Designer: Dede Ayite

Lighting Designer: Jiyoung Chang

Original Music and Sound Designer: Justin Ellington

Video Designer: Stefania Bulbarella

Hair and Wig Designer: Nikiya Mathis

Dialect and Vocal Coach: Yetunde Felix-Ukwu
Associate Director: Manna-Symone Middlebrooks
Casting Director: Caparellotis Casting, Kelly Gillespie, and Erica Hart
Stage Manager: Mandisa Reed*
Assistant Stage Manager: Jamie Berry*

*Members of Actors' Equity Association

PLAN YOUR VISIT

TICKETS: Tickets are \$45-95 plus applicable fees. Ticket prices and availability are subject to change. Arena Stage's many savings programs include "pay your age" tickets for those aged 35 and under; military, first responder, and educator discounts; student discounts; and "Southwest Nights" for those living and working in the District's Southwest neighborhood. To learn more, visit arenastage.org/savingsprograms.

Tickets are available at arenastage.org. Tickets may also be purchased by phone at 202-488-3300, or in person through the Sales Office at 1101 Sixth Street, SW, D.C., Tuesday-Sunday, 12-8 p.m.

Group Sales Hotline for 10+ Tickets: 202-488-4380

PERFORMANCE DATES:

Tuesday, Wednesday, and Sunday at 7:30 p.m.

Thursday, Friday, and Saturday at 8 p.m.

Saturday and Sunday at 2 p.m.

Weekday matinees at 12 p.m. on September 26, October 2, and October 9

No performances on September 17 and 18

Early Curtain: Sunday, September 29 at 6 p.m.

Southwest Nights: Tuesday, September 10 at 7:30 p.m. and Saturday, September 21 at 2 p.m.

Audio-Described Performance: Saturday, September 28, at 2 p.m.

ASL-Interpreted Performance: Saturday, October 5, at 8 p.m.

Mask-Required Performances: Saturday, September 14, at 2 p.m. and Tuesday, October 8, at 7:30 p.m.

Closed Captioning: GalaPro begins Friday, September 13

Industry Night: Sunday, September 8, at 7:30 p.m.

Pride Night: Wednesday, September 11, at 7:30 p.m.

NPHC/Divine Nine Night: Thursday, September 19, at 8 p.m.

Post-Show Conversations

Connect with the show beyond the performance at a post-show conversation on September 19 following the 8 p.m. performance.; October 1 following the 7:30 p.m. performance; and September 26, October 2, and October 9 following the 12 p.m. matinee performances.

Books, Braids & Beyond: Back to School Hair Event: Saturday, August 24

Get all your questions answered about adopting healthy hair habits to maintain and protect all types of hair—from 1A to 4C. In partnership with Dudley Beauty College, join us at Arena to learn about braiding techniques, trimming, and styling, to prepare for the first day of school!

Ubiquitous Women's Expo Exhibitor Booth Activation: Friday, September 6 – Sunday, Sunday 8

Join us for the 10th Anniversary celebration of the Ubiquitous Women's Expo—a vibrant space to connect across beauty, health, fashion, and lifestyle! Visit us at booth 407 as you enjoy the event.

ubiquitousexpo.com

Civic Dialogues: CROWN Act: Friday, September 13

What is the CROWN Act and what actions can we collectively take to eradicate race-based hair discrimination in the workplace? Visit Arena during the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) week of events inviting civic conversations about the CROWN Act.

Jaja's Marketplace: EmpowerHER Event: Saturday, September 21

Welcoming all entrepreneurs and beauty enthusiasts! See Arena transform into Jaja's Marketplace where you can buy from local women-owned businesses and learn what it takes to own a business and effectively promote your brand. Between the matinee and evening show, Arena will host a dynamic panel discussion featuring powerful and bold women who have mastered the art of launching and scaling their businesses to make an impact in their communities.

Howard University Homecoming Kick-Off: Sunday, October 13

HU...U Know! Calling all Howard students, staff, and alumni to join us at Arena to kick off homecoming. Sport your favorite HU gear as you mingle alongside old and new faces before joining us for the evening performance. More information coming soon.

Full Calendar: arenastage.org/tickets/calendar

TRAVEL: Limited parking is available in Arena Stage's on-site garage for \$18 to \$30, including drive-up valet parking for \$30. Call 202-488-3300 to purchase in advance. For more information on transportation and other parking options around the Mead Center, visit arenastage.org/transportation.

SAFETY: Arena Stage recommends but does not require that patrons wear facial masks in our theater except in our occasional mask-required performance. These conditions are subject to change, and Arena continues to consult with medical professionals, monitor government best practice recommendations, and engage in industry trainings to ensure the health and safety of our patrons, artists, and staff. For up-to-date information, visit arenastage.org/safety.

For complete 2024/25 Season details, visit arenastage.org/season.

The first racially integrated theater in our nation's capital and a pioneer of the regional theater movement, Arena Stage was founded on August 16, 1950, in Washington, D.C., by Zelda Fichandler, Tom Fichandler, and Edward Mangum. Today—nearly 75 years later—Arena Stage at the Mead Center for American Theater is a national center dedicated to American voices and artists. We produce plays of all that is passionate, profound, deep, and dangerous in the American spirit, and present diverse and ground-breaking work from some of the best artists around the country. Consistently contributing to the American theatrical lexicon by commissioning and developing new plays, Arena Stage impacts the lives of over 10,000 students annually through its work in community engagement and serves a diverse annual audience of more than 300,000. arenastage.org

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