

# STICK FLY

By **Lydia R. Diamond**  
Directed by **Kenny Leon**

## CURRICULUM GUIDE

This Teacher Literary and Curriculum Guide was prepared for Broadway by Lynne Johnson, Associate Director of Education for the Department of Education and Community Programs at the Huntington Theatre Company.

With contributions by:

Donna Glick, *Director of Education*

Charles Haugland, *Literary Associate*

Kevin Dunn, *Education Department Intern*

Thom Dunn, *Layout*

Jodie Beckley

Patricia Klausner

Special thanks to the **Huntington Theatre Company** and **Arena Stage** for allowing us to incorporate portions of their Teacher Curriculum and Study Guides for *Stick Fly*.

## **HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE**

There are a number of ways to use this guide depending upon your curriculum. Included are three and seven-day sample lesson plans that contain a variety of activities as well as extension and enrichment assignments for students. Alternatively, teachers may also design their own lessons by choosing those activities that are most appropriate for their class. All activities are suggestions as the classroom teacher knows best the level and depth to which any piece of literature may be experienced by his/her students.

### **Table of Contents**

Introduction from Alicia Keys	Page 3
Synopsis & Characters	Page 4
Four Central Themes	Page 5
Sample Lesson Plan	Page 8
Comprehension Questions	Page 10
Writing Topics	Page 12
Extension and Enrichment Activities	
a) History of Martha's Vineyard	Page 14
b) The Black Elite	Page 15
c) White Privilege & Race	Page 15
d) Drama	Page 16
e) The Design Process	Page 18
Meet the Playwright	Page 19


Dear Student,

Back when I first read the script for Lydia R. Diamond's incredibly beautiful, *Stick Fly*, I immediately fell in love with it and knew that I wanted to share it with as many people as possible.

One page in, I was amazed by the realness and sincerity. This is a play that makes you feel. It's a rare piece of writing that not only moves you, but flat out makes you laugh. The other thing that strikes you about *Stick Fly* is that it's relatable with universal themes that go beyond race and class. It's about family and the secrets that unravel. No matter where you come from, or what you look like, this is a story for you because it addresses the human experience.

And, that's why I am so thrilled to not only be producing and composing the music for the play, but also introducing the study guide for this amazing piece of theater that is so near and dear to my heart. And so I hope you'll enjoy *Stick Fly* as much as I do. I believe it will strike a chord with you and stay with you long after you've put it down. It will make you think, it will make you feel, and then when you least expect it, it will make you laugh.

With love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alicia Keys', written in a cursive, flowing style.

Alicia Keys

## **SYNOPSIS**

When the LeVay family opens its house for a weekend visit, the family ends up airing more than the drapes.

The LeVay brothers have invited the women in their lives to meet their parents at their luxurious Martha's Vineyard summer home. Younger brother Kent, who has struggled to find direction in his life, and has issues getting along with his father, brings his fiancée Taylor, who studies insects for her vocation. Taylor was raised in a lower-middle-class household by a single mother. Unaccustomed to privilege, she is uncomfortable in the LeVays' home, especially with Cheryl, who is filling in for her mother as the LeVays' maid. Eldest brother Flip, a successful plastic surgeon and womanizer, brings his new girlfriend, Kimber, who is privileged, white and has spent her life appalled by her status.

Tensions flair as race, class and family become prime conversation topics. When a phone call reveals a family secret, everything unravels. By the end of the weekend, lives have been turned upside-down and a family is left to reassemble the pieces.

## **CHARACTERS**

*Taylor*, twenty-seven, daughter from an earlier marriage of a renowned public intellectual.

*Kent (Spoon)*, thirty-one, youngest son of the LeVay family, growing up with an artistic disposition in a family of doctors and lawyers.

*Cheryl*, eighteen to twenty-two, daughter of the family maid.

*Flip (Harold LeVay)*, thirty-six, oldest son of the LeVay family. The "golden boy".

*Dad (Joe LeVay)*, fifty-eight to sixty-two, LeVay patriarch. A well-intentioned man who rules his family with a firm, loving hand.

*Kimber*, thirty-two, white. Flip's girlfriend. Kimber is an intelligent woman with a quick wit and sincere warmth. Unlike Taylor, her social status matches that of the LeVays, with, of course, the undeniable privilege of whiteness.

## **FOUR CENTRAL THEMES**

### **Generational Conflict**

In *Stick Fly*, the characters of Dad and Kent are in an ongoing conflict as father and son. The turbulence of their relationship mirrors their own individual struggles for personal integrity and growth; the influences of the generations of African-Americans that they represent.

Discussion Questions:

1. Define the word *integrity* and make a list of what you consider to be your own personal values.
2. Interview your parents and compile another list of their values. Compare and contrast the lists. How are they similar? How are they different? Do you feel the two generations are tolerant of each other's differences?
3. Do you feel that parents and children can still express love and respect for each other despite these differences?

### **Interracial Romance**

In *Stick Fly*, Flip and Kimber, an interracial couple, are both coming to terms with and celebrating their racial differences. Though both take pleasure in the perceived rebellion about their public displays of affection, Flip also worries about his family's acceptance of his white girlfriend. His concern is understandable: as recently as 50 years ago, a mixed-race couple would not have been allowed to marry in many states. The United States is often thought of as a melting pot, but its history of racism and government-mandated segregation has kept the number of interracial marriages relatively low.

African-Americans with advanced degrees, like Flip, are more likely to marry interracially than those with only a high school diploma. In light of these trends, the United States may be seeing more mixed couples in the future.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do you feel about interracial marriage? Do you agree with it? Why or why not?
2. When you hear the term "melting pot" what does it mean to you as an American?

3. Research the Laws regarding marriages between blacks and whites in our country.
  - What year did the law prohibiting blacks and whites to marry begin?
  - What state instituted the law first?
  - Which state was the first to allow marriages between blacks and whites? What year?
  - What year did these laws become overturned and what was the name of the case, ruled unconstitutional, regarding a mixed couple who were married in Washington, D.C., and forced to live there because the state of Virginia barred their union?
  
4. In 1970 1% of all American marriages were interracial. The Population Reference Bureau recently did a study on interracial marriages in America. What do you think is the percentage of interracial marriages in America in the present?
  - a. 45.2%
  - b. 5.4 %
  - c. 10.5%
  - d. 12.3%

## Definitions of Achievement

In *Stick Fly* the views on what is defined as achievement and success vary from character to character. Joe LeVay (Dad) has built a solid reputation as a neurosurgeon, while his son Flip has found plastic surgery to be his vocation. When son Kent decides he'd like to become a writer after years of college pursuing a law degree, a business degree and a master's in sociology, his father feels he is a failure and incapable of committing to one profession.

### Discussion Questions:

1. Do you feel Dr. Clay has the right to think Kent has failed because it took him a bit longer to find out what he wants to do with his life? When Dr. Clay greets his son by saying "So, what's up with you? Found a career you want to stick with for five minutes?" What do you think he means? What is he saying about his son's character and life choices?
  
2. Have you ever been interested in a profession or project that your parents felt was unsuitable or a waste of your time and energy? How did that make you feel?

## **Class/Status in America**

In *Stick Fly*, class and status play a large part in overall make-up of each character and their objectives in the play. For instance, Taylor's character is conflicted by the fact that she was neglected by her famous and well-to-do father, while she and her mother struggled to survive on a single mother's salary. Taylor's background drives her character's perception of the wealthy Dr. LeVay and his family, and sets up her role as the protagonist in the play.

Kimber's presence also helps to set the tone for the play. Taylor is made to feel a double sense of lower status, due to the fact that Kimber is wealthy and also white. Taylor feels threatened on several levels because she feels Kimber fits in better with the wealthy LeVay's than she does as a black woman.

### Discussion Questions:

1. What obligation do you think parents have to provide for their children?
2. How do you and your friends treat other students that have more/less money than you?
3. Have you seen or experienced examples of wealth trumping race in the United States? What did you observe/experience?

## SAMPLE LESSON PLAN

Three-Day Lesson Plan -- Introduces students to the production and then, after viewing the performance, asks them to think critically about what they have seen.

### Lesson Objectives

1. After viewing the play, students will be able to identify central themes in *Stick Fly* including:
  - a. Generational Conflict;
  - b. Interracial Romance;
  - c. Definitions of Achievement;
  - d. Class/Status in America
  
2. Students will analyze the significance of the play's themes and issues within American culture and will relate the themes and issues in the play to their own lives.

### DAY ONE – Introduce the Play

1. Distribute the **Character Description** and ask pairs of students to create a graphic organizer that demonstrates the relationships, i.e. family tree or mind map. Ask students to predict what the play might be about based on the character descriptions and relationships.
  
2. Read the **Synopsis** of the play. Ask students if the synopsis validates their suppositions and have them further expand their predictions of the major themes and issues based on additional information gleaned from the Synopsis.
  
3. In preparation for a positive play experience, discuss the following questions with your class as many students have not had the opportunity to view live theatre. Setting expectations with students BEFORE attending the performance will greatly enhance their experience at the theatre.
  - How does one respond to a live performance of a play, as opposed to when seeing a film at a local cinema?
  - What is the best way to approach viewing a live performance of a play?
  - What things should you look and listen for?
  - What is the audience's role during a live performance?
  - How do you think audience behavior can affect an actor's performance?
  - What do you know about the theatrical rehearsal process?



- Have you ever participated in one as an actor, singer, director, or technical person?
- How do costumes, set, lights, sound, and props enhance a theatre production?

#### DAY TWO – Attend the Production

Attend a performance at the Cort Theatre, 138 West 48<sup>th</sup> Street, NYC.

Homework: Students should prepare a brief written response validating their predictions of the themes/issues with specific examples from the play.

#### DAY THREE – Follow Up Discussion/Activities

Lead a discussion of the central themes in which each pair of students validates one prediction with concrete examples from the play. List the themes identified by students and focus discussion on the following central themes: Generational Conflict, Interracial Romance, Definitions of Achievement, and Class/Status in America. Suggested questions are provided in the Four Central Themes section of this guide and teachers should feel free to create their own questions as well.

Assignment: Students choose one of the three topics below and complete the writing assignment as a closing activity for this lesson.

1. Explain why you think the playwright chose the title *Stick Fly* for the play.
2. Choose a favorite character. What do you think happens to this character after the play ends? Write a paragraph describing where they are one, five or ten years later.
3. Choose a relationship between two characters in *Stick Fly*, who you believe makes the most dramatic change during the course of the play. In an essay, describe the journey these two characters take.

## **COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS**

### **Act 1**

#### **Scene 1**

- 1) How does Taylor feel about Kent's family situation?
- 2) Describe the dynamic between Taylor and Flip.

#### **Scene 2**

- 1) How does Taylor treat Cheryl? How do the other characters treat Cheryl? Do you notice any significant patterns or contrasts?
- 2) What is Mr. LeVay's attitude toward his sons and Taylor? What are their attitudes towards Mr. LeVay?

#### **Scene 3**

- 1) What might Mr. LeVay have to say to Cheryl?

#### **Scene 4**

- 1) Why does Cheryl ask if Taylor has read her own father's book?
- 2) What does Taylor imply when she tells Kimber "I thought you'd have an accent?"
- 3) Taylor, Cheryl, and Kimber are the only non-family in the house, and each is trying to assert or establish her own role. Do these roles come into conflict? Explain.

#### **Scene 5**

- 1) What does Taylor call the eight white girls in her women's studies class? What is she suggesting by giving them all the same name?
- 2) Compare the interaction between Mr. LeVay and Taylor with the interaction between Kent and Kimber. Do these seemingly opposite characters clash, or do they form unexpected alliances?
- 3) When Mrs. LeVay is mentioned in this scene, how do the family members and particularly Mr. LeVay react?
- 4) What do we find out about Taylor and Flip in this scene? How does Flip describe their history?

## **Act 2**

### Scene 1

- 1) This scene shuttles between two conversations, often with two characters saying the same thing simultaneously, despite being in different rooms. What effect does this produce? What is the playwright's purpose in having the scenes occur simultaneously?

### Scene 2

- 1) What apparent gesture of goodwill does Kimber make towards Taylor?

### Scene 3

- 1) What scandal that has been slowly growing throughout the play culminates in this scene?
- 2) At the end of the scene, Flip asks his father "How did you not stop to think about us?". How do you interpret it?

### Scene 4

- 1) In this scene, there are two people in the living room, and two people in the kitchen. Are they having different conversations, or are they discussing the same event from different perspectives? Explain.
- 2) With whom does Kent most identify his mother or his father? With whom does Flip most identify?

### Scene 5

- 1) Mrs. LeVay and Ellie are constantly referred to in the play, but never actually make an appearance. What effect does this produce?
- 2) What is the double-significance of Taylor saying that everyone needs to stay "to clean up the mess?" What is the double-significance of Mr. LeVay's response?
- 3) Of all of the relationships in the play, which do you think will succeed, and which do you think may fail? Have any already failed?
- 4) How do you interpret the last line? Is it meant to be humorous? Ironic? Representative of the play? If you were playing Taylor, how would you deliver this line?

## WRITING TOPICS

- 1) Dr. LeVay has distinctly different relationships with both of his sons. Discuss the difference in the way Dr. LeVay treats Kent as compared to Flip. What do you feel are the main reasons he does so? Discuss what these relationships say about Dr. LeVay's character.
- 2) Taylor and Kimber "knock heads" in Act 1, Scene 5. Getting to the true heart of the matter, what would you describe as the root of the underlying problem Taylor has with Kimber?
- 3) In the play, Taylor and Cheryl seem to be "uncomfortable" around each other. In your assessment, why do these two characters feel this way?
- 4) Most plays have a protagonistic and antagonistic force. Define these two terms. Who or what is the protagonist in this play? Who or what is the antagonist? Justify your choices.
- 5) Many of the characters in this play are at life defining moments. Write a short essay about a similar time in your own life. How did these life-defining moments affect you? How did you deal with it? Do you believe you would have done anything differently now to solve the situation?
- 6) Mrs. LeVay and Cheryl's mother, Ms. Ellie, are not "on-stage" characters, but still vital to action of the play. Choose one of these characters and write a journal entry from their point of view, expanding on what you already know about them in the story.
- 7) Use one of the following lines from *Stick Fly* as a topic for a short essay:
  - KENT: Mom's classy/ French, Italian, Swahili. Undergrad art history, master's child development, MFA interdisciplinary arts integration, all so she could be here with warm cookies when we got home from school.
  - TAYLOR: No, Kimberly. I was upset because people like you can't see it. Your inner-city kids aren't supposed to succeed...As long as they can stay ignorant and dependent on you, they won't have to mess up the white spaces. They let one or two of us in who've had enough privilege to almost play the game. Just enough to make us think we're special.
  - KIMBER: I want to have the babies of the man I love. They'll come out whatever color they come out, and I will love them because they will be my babies. You can't know this. But you will. You will be in love one day, and you will know this.

- KIMBER: Racism, discrimination, whatever. You can't imply that it exists. It's like we're supposed to have come so far that it's taboo to suggest we have any further to go.
- 8) Cheryl finds out shocking news in the play. Write and perform a monologue in which Cheryl talks directly to Dr. LeVay following the revelation that he is her biological parent.
  - 9) Taylor, who studies bugs for a living, quotes her mother: "Look baby, you just have to look at everyone like they're bugs under a microscope. Like ants. Figure out the patterns." Write a brief essay stating what you think this means and how it relates to the title of the play.
  - 10) Lydia Diamond has written this play in order to present the African-American experience in America in a different light than is normally portrayed on television and in the movies. Do you think Ms. Diamond has successfully presented a realistic portrait of an African-American lifestyle? Why or why not?

## **EXTENSION AND ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES**

### **HISTORY OF MARTHA’S VINEYARD**

An island off the coast of Massachusetts, Martha’s Vineyard is often thought of as a vacation spot for rich and glamorous white people. However, a closer look reveals the island’s rich cultural and racial history.

Divide students into groups and research the history of Martha’s Vineyard where *Stick Fly* takes place. You will find that the background of Martha’s Vineyard will provide the perfect backdrop to underscore the themes in our play.

#### **Group One**

The original residents, the Wampanoag’s were the first people to settle Martha’s Vineyard. They called the island Noepe, meaning, “land amid the waters.” More Native American tribes joined the Wampanoag’s, eventually creating a community of 3,000 people divided among four chief tribes.

Research information about the Wampanoag’s past and present history on Martha’s Vineyard.

#### **Group Two**

Oak Bluffs is rich in black history and remains a community for most well off African-Americans – politicians, artists, academics, etc. Interestingly, the African-American residents call the main beach of Oak Bluffs “The Inkwell”, a pointed name referring to the black community in the largely white Martha’s Vineyard. In *Stick Fly*, Taylor’s famous professor father notably owned a cottage in Oak Bluffs.

Surprisingly, the idea of taking summer vacation in Martha’s Vineyard has its roots steeped in religion. From about 1790 to 1840, the United States experienced the Second Great Awakening, a period of religious revival and massive conversions and the formation of new congregations. The island was also caught up in religious fervor, which resulted in the forming of Oak Bluffs.

Research information about the town of Oak Bluffs, and how Reverend John Saunders, one of the first blacks to settle in the area can be credited for his diversity, because he brought Methodism to Martha’s Vineyard changing the features Martha’s Vineyard, making Oak Bluffs the beautiful town it is today.

#### **Group Three**

Joe Clay owns his home in Edgartown, which is known to be a predominately high status white population. In 1879, the black community was so considerable on Martha’s Vineyard that African-American residents voted to separate Oak Bluffs from the bigger, white-dominated Edgartown and form their own town.

Find pictures of the homes and Oak Bluffs and Edgartown. How does the history of each of these towns dictate the difference in styles and architecture?

## THE BLACK ELITE

After Reconstruction, there emerged in America a new social class, the black elite. Some former slaves, now able to own property, were starting their own businesses and attending college. The brightest were entering lucrative careers in medicine, dentistry, and law. Those achieving the highest levels of financial and educational success become known as the black elite, or the black aristocracy.

Still separate from whites, they started their own social and civic organizations, such as Jack and Jill, and hosted their own formal events.

In cities, one of the most popular social events was the cotillion ball - formal dance dating back to 18th-century France. Generally sponsored by an elite social organization, cotillions were chances to introduce wealthy young women – called debutantes – to well-to-do society. In preparation of these balls, debutantes learned formal dances and proper etiquette, and they shopped for fancy dresses. Young men from other wealthy families served as their escorts and dance partners.

Cotillions are becoming less common, but they remain popular in many Southern cities, including Raleigh, Charleston, Memphis and Baltimore.

**Activity:** Look up pictures from cotillions, both past and present. Select your favorite image. Imagine you're a person in that photograph. Write a 1- to 2- page narrative or monologue describing your experience at the cotillion. What did you wear? Who were your dance partners? What drama unfolded during the cotillion?

## WHITE PRIVILEGE & RACE

The character Taylor shares the story of an honors seminar she took in college, and, in telling it, unleashes her anger about racial inequality and white privilege.

Taylor expresses her frustration at taking a class on 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism that does not include any authors of color. She also rails at “teaching cultural sensitivity 101 every time I turn around.”

Critical race theory often focuses on the disadvantages people experience because of their race. White privilege focuses on the advantages white people have by virtue of being white. Through the lens of white privilege, white people view their lives as normal, rather than advantaged.

In her paper “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” Peggy McIntosh writes, “I was taught to see racism only in individual acts of meanness, not in invisible systems conferring dominance on my group.” As a white woman, she lists 50 examples of white privilege from her daily life. These include:

- “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.”
- “I am never asked to speak for all people of my racial group.”

- “I have no difficulty finding neighborhoods where people approve of our household.”
- “I can choose blemish cover of bandages in ‘flesh’ and have them more or less match my skin.”

McIntosh points out that some aspects of white privilege, like feelings of safety, should be true for all people in a just society. Other aspects, such as not having to pay attention to the art, issues or voices of other races, should be true for no one.

Some theorists argue that approaching race from the angle of white privilege involves all people—including whites—in changing the systems in America and making them more just and equal.

**Activity:** Race is not the only issue the LeVays and their guests discuss. When you watch the play, notice the moments when the issue of class intrudes. Identify some of those moments in the play. How do the characters relate to each other with regard to the issue of class. In general, do you feel that the United States faces up to the challenges of class differences? Why or why not? *“You know, they’d hold the bag up to your face...run the comb through your hair and if the comb can’t get through, or if the bag’s lighter than you, well...clearly you’re at the wrong party.” – Dr. LeVay in Stick Fly*

#### FACT: Brown Paper Bag Test

The brown-paper-bag test was a tool for discrimination within the black community. It was used to determine who could participate in certain activities, cotillions, fraternities and events. If your skin was darker than the bag, you were not welcome. The test echoes the value system created by slavery, when the darker slaves worked in the fields and the lighter slaves worked in the home of the slave-owner.

Research the years following the American Civil War to establish both legal and illegal tools of discrimination. Discover not only the ways and means of race discrimination between whites and African-Americans, but determine how the issue of class within the African American community contributed to discriminatory actions.

## DRAMA

### Characterization

Have each student choose a character from *Stick Fly* to portray. As if they were preparing for the role in rehearsal, have them answer the following questions about their characters:

1. What do I want in the play? What is my overall objective?
2. What stands in the way of what I want? What or who are my obstacles in the way of achieving my objective? Does what I want change throughout the course of the play? How?



3. How, if at all, does my character change during the course of the play? What is my character's journey or plot transformation?
4. Are there any contradictions inherent in my character?

**Going Deeper:** Ask students to consider their character's cultural background and how it influences that character's actions in the play. Other factors to consider are: what was the most important event in the character's life prior to the time depicted in the play; why does the character pursue his or her current objective in the play; what specific events in the character's past affect the way that character speaks or moves during the play?

### **Role Playing/Improvisation**

Ask students to improvise an important moment from *Stick Fly*. Students should test the effects of changing something about the performance—tone of voice, a character trait, or a vital remark. How does such a change affect the selected moment? How does the pacing or posturing of an actor affect the timing of the piece? Is it possible that a change in the tone of voice can turn a serious moment into a humorous one?

Ask students to improvise scenes using characters who are mentioned in the play but are not onstage, i.e. (1) Mrs. and Dr. LeVay's argument before the Dr. leaves to go to the Vineyard, or (2) The telephone conversation between Mrs. LeVay and Ms. Ellie following the revelation that Dr. LeVay is Cheryl's biological father.

**Going Deeper:** Have students choose one character at a particularly defining moment in their life, prior to, or subsequent to the events of *Stick Fly*. Ask students to create a monologue or in pairs create a scene, which portrays this defining moment in the character's life. How do the character's choices and reaction to this fictional defining moment compare to events in the play?

### **Visual Art**

In the play there are references to art and art history most likely due to the fact that Ms. LeVay received her undergraduate degree in art history. In Act 1, Scene 1 Taylor is looking at the house décor and notices a painting by the artist Romare Bearden. She also alludes to the fact that there are other original artwork by artists' not mentioned. Have your students research the work of Romare Bearden. Based on their findings, ask students to determine what other artwork might be of interest to the LeVay family, best fitting the décor of their Martha's Vineyard summer home.

**Going Deeper:** Ask students to choose one or two characters from the play. Based on what they know about each character, have them research and choose artwork they feel would best express the personality of the character(s).

## **THE DESIGN PROCESS**

The world of *Stick Fly* could be unfolding at the same time the audience is watching the play. The playwright intentionally includes references to current culture and events. The characters are familiar to us, the language is accessible, and situations the characters experience are ones to which the audience can identify with.

What are some tangible items that represent modern day? Have students work to create a “setting collage”, considering what they can include to make their piece represent the 21<sup>st</sup> century, considering events, music, fashion, politics, social and cultural concerns. How do you illustrate every day life? Then, have them consider how to capture their “setting collage” onstage. Are there certain items students can think of that would help create the atmosphere so the actors don’t appear as if they could be any place at any time? How do you create a life-size visual of a day-in-the-life of a modern family that still looks theatrical?

### **Costume Design**

Imagine that you have been asked to design costumes for the play. Choose a character and create a costume plan for your character. For each scene, write down what your character is wearing. Make sure to note the playwright’s stage directions. You may draw the costumes or provide pictures from magazines or the Internet as a visual aid for your plan. Remember that costuming provides visual cues to the audience about what is happening in the play. How does your character’s wardrobe change from Act 1 to Act 2? Costumes should reflect the character’s age and social status. What colors and styles do you think reflects the character’s personality and mood? Each character’s circumstances should be reflected through the clothing he/she wears. After attending a performance of *Stick Fly*, compare your costuming ideas with those of the production’s costume designer. How are they similar or different?

## MEET THE PLAYWRIGHT

### **A Diamond in the Rough**

Lydia Diamond

It's not unusual for a 12-year-old girl to have a crush on a baseball player. However, when that girl transcribes her fantasies into a romance novel—which she acts out with her Barbie dolls—it's not hard to imagine her future as a successful playwright.

Detroit native Lydia Diamond (formerly Lydia Gartin) comes from an artistic and intellectual background: her grandmother played the piano and taught lessons at a church, and her grandfather played the violin and was an interim principal at a predominantly white elementary school. Both held master's degrees, a rarity for black people in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Diamond's mother also played the piano and flute, and she managed a fine arts center at University of Massachusetts at Amherst. Diamond tried her hand at the violin, but she discovered that her calling led her down a more dramatic path.

In 1987 Diamond enrolled in Northwestern University as an aspiring actress, but after taking a playwriting class from the only African-American professor on campus, she switched her major from acting to performance studies. After graduation, Diamond remained in Chicago and launched her own company, *Another Small Black Theater Company with Good Things to Say and a Lot of Nerve Productions*—which she fondly describes as a “one-woman show with the support of a lot of talented and beautiful friends.” While working as a cook and waitress at Café Voltaire, she took the opportunity to present her work in its basement. The performance of her first piece, *Solitaire*, was well received and led to many other productions.

Diamond continued to write plays, but it wasn't until she became a resident with Chicago Dramatists that she began to define herself as a playwright. Though she continued to pick up a few acting roles, she eventually shifted her entire focus from being onstage to the page. In an interview with the Ma'at Production Association of Afrikan Centered Theater, she said, “My experiences as an actor helped me understand that I am truly a playwright, that writing the plays made me feel empowered in a way that acting never did.”

Along with the epiphany came a period of struggle. Diamond worked temp jobs and had little money to support her craft. However, after a production of *The Gift Horse* at Chicago's Goodman Theater, her luck changed.

Steppenwolf's Artistic Director Martha Lavey and Director of New Play Development Edward Sobel offered Diamond a commission, which became *Voyeurs de Venus*, a play about Saartije Baartman, a 19<sup>th</sup>-century South African woman taken to America and exploited for her body. Diamond continued to work with Steppenwolf on her adaptation of Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*.

Diamond's other plays include *Stage Black*, *The Inside*, *Lizzie Stranton*, and *Stick Fly*. Diamond has said of *Stick Fly*, "What I think is interesting, and what *Stick Fly* explores, is that the struggles don't necessarily change because the environment does. But the environment can change, and black people in those environments are black, too." She is most attracted to themes of "relationships, race and class...things that we can't seem to resolve naturally."

Diamond is currently working on *Harriet Jacobs: Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* and teaching playwriting part-time at Boston University. She lives with her husband, John Diamond, a sociologist and professor at Harvard University, and their son, Baylor.

### **Assignment**

How can learning about and analyzing the lives of artists help us to understand their art?

1. Research other articles about Lydia Diamond you may find online.
2. Based on the information you receive, formulate an opinion on which of the characters in *Stick Fly* the playwright might most identify with.
3. Decide why she may have written this play, and what main point she wanted to drive home through this character's voice.