

## LA JOLLA PLAYHOUSE ANNOUNCES CAST AND CREATIVE TEAM FOR JAJA'S AFRICAN HAIR BRAIDING

### Tony Award-Nominated Broadway Hit Makes Southern California Premiere

La Jolla, CA – La Jolla Playhouse announces the cast and creative team for its upcoming production of ***Jaja's African Hair Braiding***, by **Jocelyn Bioh**, directed by **Whitney White**, running in the Mandell Weiss Theatre **May 17 – June 15** (press opening: May 22). *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* is a co-production with Arena Stage, Berkeley Repertory Theatre, Center Theatre Group and Chicago Shakespeare Theater, in association with Madison Wells Live and LaChanze. For tickets and information, please visit [lajollaplayhouse.org](http://lajollaplayhouse.org).

The cast features **Melanie Brezill** as *Michelle/Chrissy/Laniece*; **Leovina Charles** as *Vanessa/Sheila/Radia*; **Victoire Charles** as *Jaja*; **Mia Ellis** as *Jennifer*; **Onye Eme-Akwari** as *James/Franklin/Olu/Eric*; **Tiffany Renee Johnson** as *Aminata*; **Claudia Logan** as *Bea*; **Jordan Rice** as *Marie*; **Aisha Sougou** as *Ndidi*; and **Bisserat Tsegai** as *Miriam*, plus understudies **Mysia Anderson-White**, **Debora Crabbe**, **Vandous Stripling II** and **Donae Swanson**.

The creative team includes **Manna-Symone Middlebrook**, Additional Direction for La Jolla Playhouse; three-time Tony Award winner **David Zinn**, Scenic Designer; Tony Award winner **Dede Ayite**, Costume Designer; **Jiyoun Chang**, Lighting Designer; **Justin Ellington**, Original Music and Sound Designer; **Stefania Bulbarella**, Video Designer; Tony Award winner **Nikiya Mathis**, Hair and Wig Designer; **Erica A. Hart CSA**, **Kelly Gillespie CSA** and **David Caparelliotis CSA**, Casting; **Jacqueline Springfield**, Dialect and Vocal Coach; **Ann C. James**, Sensitivity Specialist; **Melanie J. Lisby**, Stage Manager; and **Edward Khris Fernandez** and **Brilliant Qi-Bell**, Assistant Stage Managers.

"*Jaja's African Hair Braiding* is a joyful and compelling celebration of the communities and cultures that intersect inside a hair braiding salon over the course of one day," said **Christopher Ashley**, the Rich Family Artistic Director of La Jolla Playhouse. "I can't wait for San Diego audiences to experience this deeply funny and affecting new work, featuring a superb cast and creative team."

Direct from Broadway, this dazzling production welcomes you into Jaja's bustling shop in Harlem, where a lively and eclectic group of West African hair braiders create masterpieces on the heads of neighborhood women. During one sweltering summer day, love will blossom, dreams will flourish, and friendships will be tested. When their uncertain circumstances boil over, this tight-knit group must confront what it means to be outsiders in the place they call home. *The New York Times* raved that Jaja's is "full of treasurable moments, when the drama feels tightly woven with the comedy." Featuring humor as entertaining as its characters, ***Jaja's African Hair Braiding*** celebrates courage, community and the indomitable spirit of women.

*Jaja's African Hair Braiding* was nominated for five Tony Awards in 2023, including Best Play and Best Direction of a Play, and won for Best Costume Design of a Play, plus a special award for Nikiya Mathis's Hair and Wig design. In addition, the production was nominated for three 2023 Drama Desk Awards, including Outstanding Play, Outstanding Hair and Wig Design, and Outstanding Featured Performance in a Play.

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**Jocelyn Bioh** is an award-winning, Tony Award-nominated Ghanaian-American writer and performer from New York City. Her written works for theatre include *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* (MTC), which premiered on Broadway in 2023 and was nominated for five Tony Awards including Best Play; *Merry Wives* (Public Theater's Shakespeare in the Park, PBS Great Performances), which won the 2022 Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Adaptation; *Nollywood Dreams* (MCC Theater); and the multi-award winning *School Girls; Or, The African Mean Girls Play*, which was originally produced at MCC Theater in 2017/2018 and has gone on to have over 70 regional productions and premiered in the UK in 2023. Jocelyn was a 2017 Tow Playwriting Fellow and has won several playwriting awards, including the Dramatists Guild's Hull-Warriner Prize (2018 and 2024), Steinberg Playwright Award, Lortel Award, Drama Desk Award, and is the winner of the 2024 Horton Foote Prize. Jocelyn has also written for TV on *Russian Doll*, Spike Lee's *She's Gotta Have It* (Netflix), *Tiny Beautiful Things* (Hulu), the Star Wars series *The Acolyte* (Disney+), and is writing the live action film adaption of the hit Broadway musical *Once On This Island* for Disney.

**Whitney White's** Broadway credits include *The Last Five Years*, *Jaja's African Hair Braiding*, *Marvin's Room*. Off-Broadway: *Jordans*, *What to Send Up When It Goes Down* (Public Theater); *Soft* (MCC Theater); *On Sugarland*, *Othello* (New York Theatre Workshop); *If I Forget* (Roundabout Theatre), Vineyard Theatre, The New Group, Page 73, The Playwrights Realm, Juilliard, Trinity Rep, The Drama League, and others. International: *The Secret Life of Bees* (Almeida Theatre); Sundance. Regional: *The Most Spectacularly Lamentable Trial of Miz Martha Washington* (Steppenwolf Theatre Company); *The Amen Corner* (Shakespeare Theatre Company); *An Iliad* (Long Wharf Theatre); *Canyon* (IAMA Theatre Company); world premiere of *Jump* (PlayMakers Repertory Company); Trinity Repertory Company. Original Works include *Semblance*, *Definition*, *Macbeth in Stride*. Education: M.F.A. in acting, Brown University; B.A., Northwestern University. Awards: Obie, Lilly, Tony nomination for direction, writing, and music, two *New York Times* Critic's Picks, *LA Times* Critics Choice, Elliott Norton Award for Outstanding Musical Performance, Susan Stroman Directing, Herb Alpert, Jerome Fellowship. White is an Artistic Associate (Roundabout Theatre) and former staff writer on Boots Riley's *I'm a Virgo*.

**La Jolla Playhouse** is a place where artists and audiences come together to create what's new and next in the American theatre, from Tony Award-winning productions, to imaginative programs for young audiences, to interactive experiences outside our theatre walls. Founded in 1947 by Gregory Peck, Dorothy McGuire and Mel Ferrer, the Playhouse is currently led by Tony Award winner Christopher Ashley, the Rich Family Artistic Director of La Jolla Playhouse, and Managing Director Debby Buchholz. The Playhouse is internationally renowned for the development of new plays and musicals, including mounting 120 world premieres, commissioning 70 new works, and sending 37 productions to Broadway, garnering a total of 42 Tony Awards, as well as the 1993 Tony Award for Outstanding Regional Theatre.

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## FACT SHEET

**WHAT:** ***Jaja's African Hair Braiding***  
By Jocelyn Bioh  
Directed by Whitney White  
Co-produced with Arena Stage, Berkeley Repertory Theatre,  
Center Theatre Group and Chicago Shakespeare Theater,  
in association with Madison Wells Live and LaChanze

**WHEN:** **May 17 – June 15** (Press Opening: May 22 at 7:30pm)  
Tue/Wed/Thu/Fri at 7:30pm; Sat at 2pm & 8pm; Sun at 1pm & 7pm

**WHERE:** **Mandell Weiss Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse**  
2910 La Jolla Village Drive, La Jolla, CA 92037

**WHO:** Additional Direction for La Jolla Playhouse: Manna-Symone Middlebrook  
Scenic Designer: David Zinn  
Costume Designer: Dede Ayite  
Lighting Designer: Jiyoung Chang  
Original Music and Sound Designer: Justin Ellington  
Video Designer: Stefania Bulbarella  
Hair, Wig and Makeup Designer: Nikiya Mathis  
Sensitivity Specialist: Ann C. James  
Casting: Erica A. Hart CSA, Kelly Gillespie CSA, David Caparelliotis CSA  
Dialect and Vocal Coach: Jacqueline Springfield  
Stage Manager: Melanie J. Lisby  
Assistant Stage Managers: Edward Khris Fernandez, Brillian Qi-Bell

### Cast:

|                                 |                       |
|---------------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Michelle/Chrissy/Laniece</i> | Melanie Brezill       |
| <i>Vanessa/Sheila/Radia</i>     | Leovina Charles       |
| <i>Jaja</i>                     | Victoire Charles      |
| <i>Jennifer</i>                 | Mia Ellis             |
| <i>James/Franklin/Olu/Eric</i>  | Onye Eme-Akwari       |
| <i>Aminata</i>                  | Tiffany Renee Johnson |
| <i>Bea</i>                      | Claudia Logan         |
| <i>Marie</i>                    | Jordan Rice           |
| <i>Ndidi</i>                    | Aisha Sougou          |
| <i>Miriam</i>                   | Bisserat Tseggai      |

Understudies: Mysia Anderson-White, Debora Crabbe, Vandous Stripling II,  
Donae Swanson

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**BACKGROUND:**

Direct from Broadway, this dazzling production welcomes you into Jaja's bustling shop in Harlem, where a lively and eclectic group of West African hair braiders create masterpieces on the heads of neighborhood women. During one sweltering summer day, love will blossom, dreams will flourish, and friendships will be tested. When their uncertain circumstances boil over, this tight-knit group must confront what it means to be outsiders in the place they call home. *The New York Times* raved, "full of treasurable moments, when the drama feels tightly woven with the comedy." Featuring humor as entertaining as its characters, *Jaja's African Hair Braiding* celebrates courage, community and the indomitable spirit of women.

**SPONSORS:** Ralph and Gail Bryan; Dove/Crown Coalition

**TICKETS:** [lajollaplayhouse.org](http://lajollaplayhouse.org); (858) 550-1010

**CONTACT:** Becky Biegelsen: [bbiegelsen@ljp.org](mailto:bbiegelsen@ljp.org)

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