

School Girls; or, The African Mean Girls Play

Introduction

Welcome to this performance of *School Girls; or, The African Mean Girls Play*. It was written by **Jocelyn Bioh** and directed by **Monique Touko**.

The performance lasts for 80 minutes without an interval and will be described by **Ruth James** and **Willie Elliott**.

The performance will feature haze and flashing lights. It also contains themes or references that some audience members find upsetting and/or unsettling; including: colourism, body-shaming, disordered eating, racism and dangerous beauty practices.

It's 1986 at Ghana's prestigious Aburi [EE-bree] Girls Boarding School. Six teenage girls, led by **Queen Bee Paulina**, excitedly await the arrival of the Miss Ghana pageant recruiter. It's clear that **Paulina** is in top position to take the title until a beautiful and talented new transfer student, Ericka arrives.

The set remains unchanged throughout the play, except for slight adjustments that are made when we move from one location to another.

As you take your seat, the stage is open to you.

Across the back of the stage, a painted backdrop shows the warming glow of dawn rising over a jagged black mountain range on the far horizon.

The playing area is on three levels, two wide rostra stepping up from the front of the stage to the back, that take up the full width of the stage. The front edges of the steps are decorated with square bricks pierced with a leaf pattern.

On each of the three levels, two metre high partition walls on casters can be wheeled left and right, changing the location, from a school canteen, to the headmistress's office, or a classroom.

The partitions are four metres wide, and like the steps, are pierced with a decorative pattern so that light bleeds through from the other side. The front two pairs are painted green, while the highest, at the back are solid grey concrete, with letterbox windows along the top, with green painted metal window frames.

When we visit the school canteen, four picnic tables are wheeled into place, with benches either side. Nine large white fans hang from the unseen ceiling, three across in three rows.

Other locations will be described as they appear.

There is a cast of eight women varying in age from their teens to their early 40's.

The six schoolgirls are all Ghanaian, and wear the school uniform of full, knee-length skirts made from a traditional African pattern of yellow, green and brown stripes. A strip of this material is inserted into the short-sleeves of the otherwise plain primrose yellow shirts, that are tucked into the skirts. All the girls have natural hair, the curls combed out into full afros. However, each girl has added their own individual twist to the uniform.

Paulina Sarpong is the leader of the group, an imperious and attractive 18 year old, with high cheekbones. Paulina is the tallest, and wears her uniform with an air of elegance and pomposity, her hair tied up with a showy bow at the front, revealing high clunky gold earrings. She also wears thin gold bangles and rings, and her brown leather sandals are smart and match her plaited brown leather belt. Unlike the others, she constantly carries the schoolbag of dark green cotton, with the Aburi school shield and motto in white on it.

Ama seems more studious, with gold-rimmed glasses held on a golden chain, polished tan slip-on shoes and dark green knee-socks, pulled up neatly at all times. She contains her afro with a band of the school shirt's yellow material, tied in a casual bow at the back, and wears no jewelry.

The other girls in the group are younger than Paulina and Ama, and look up to them. **Nana** is curvy, sensitive and shy. Like Ama, she also wears little jewelry apart from a watch with a brown leather strap, while her afro, textured hair is swept up into two puffs, encircled by green, patterned scrunchies.

The last two are cousins – **Gifty** and **Mercy**. They both wear one green and yellow plastic bangle – one on each wrist – Mercy has the green one on the right, yellow on the left, and Gifty reverses this. Mercy also holds her hair back on one side with a slide covered in green material, and wears faded black Birkenstock sandals, while Gifty's sandals are orange.

Headmistress Francis is in her late thirties, a tall, slim and elegant woman in a tight-fitting skirt suit, the peplum jacket swirling out in a frill over the narrow skirt. It's a bright fuschia pink, with inset panels of a pink, white and black print on each side and at the collar. She has tortoiseshell reading glasses on a silver chain, pearl stud earrings and very subtle make-up.

Into this stable environment erupts **Ericka Boafo**. She is a charming and generous mixed race girl, with skin that is much lighter than the others, an oval face and delicate features. Her thick brown hair is relaxed into a straight 80s long bob, with only a very slight kink, and hangs in a bob over her shoulders, held back with a pale yellow headband. Ericka carries a newly issued green schoolbag and wears converse sneakers.

Finally we meet **Eloise Am Ponsah**, light-skinned and the same age as Headmistress Francis. Her caramel coloured hair is stiffly styled, and she wears flamboyant and stylish clothes – skin-tight leopard-print leggings, with a short blue tailored jacket over a white satin shirt. Her jewelry is also attention-grabbing, all of gold, while, her blue fan matches her shoes and bag. Later she wears a lemon coloured blouse with a short skirt in red and white check.

Eloise's gestures are all stylised, with a conscious effort at grace, as befits her role as a recruiter for the Miss Ghana Pageant, having been Miss Ghana herself in 1966. Later, the girls appear in glamorous outfits for their audition with Eloise. All of them are the elaborate creations considered normal in the late 80s – with enormous puff sleeves, padded shoulders, flounces and frills galore, with shoes and bags that match exactly.

Pauline's mini dress is the most extraordinary; salmon-pink satin covered with a net overdress of sparkling white lace, and a long satin train, with an accompanying salmon-pink clutch bag. A headdress of shells dangles over her hair, fringing her forehead, with matching shell earrings. She also sports a large corsage of three blowsy roses at her wrist.

Nana is slightly more restrained, in a long, traditional pageant dress of purple African fabric, with kente accents, plain panels at the sides, and puffed sleeves. Gifty is in ruched jade green satin and net, while Mercy is in flaming orange. Their short dresses are both in the same style with asymmetric hems and endless flounces. Mercy also has a high orange headdress, while Gifty has a net fascinator, perched on the side of her head. Ama seems slightly more rustic, in a warm yellow African print, with a head band of yellow net and long strings of orange beads.

Finally, Ericka wears a dusky pink creation, with a spangled bodice, gathered puffy sleeves, and a short, pleated silk skirt under acres of pink net that spread out around her.

CAST AND CREATIVES

Headmistress Francis, is played by Alison A Addo

Ama by Heather Agyepong

Mercy by Bola Akeju

Eloise Amponsah by Deborah Alli

Gifty by Francesca Amewudah-Rivers

Nana by Jadesola Odunjo

Ericka by Anna Shaffer

Paulina by Tara Tijani

Music

Shiloh Coke

Choreography and Movement

Aline David

Sound Designer

Tony Gayle

Lighting Designer

Matt Haskins

Wigs, Hair and Make-up Designer

Cynthia De La Rosa

Costume Designer

Set Designer

Director

Writer

Kinnetia Isidore

Paul Wills

Monique Touko

Jocelyn Bioh