Harriet Jacobs
DISCUSSION GUIDE

SYNOPSIS
Harriet Jacobs is inspired by Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl, the true story of a young black woman who lives in a time when being pretty is a liability, being educated is a crime punishable by death and the only thing she can truly own is her soul. We meet Harriet while she is in hiding. In the solitude of a cramped attic, she writes and tries to make sense of the circumstances and choices that brought her to this point.

WHY STUDY HARRIET JACOBS?
Harriet Jacobs examines the “peculiar institution” of slavery as an American story, not just a culturally isolated incident. It calls us to consider why we make the choices we do, how we allow our struggles to shape our lives, and the belief that we are not solely defined by our transgressions. By witnessing the life of a young writer who turns the weight of her burdens into activism and social commentary, we can be inspired to see our challenges and choices as tools of empowerment.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE:
This Discussion Guide presents questions to consider about Harriet’s story and about the play. Use each section as a conversation starter or prompt for an exercise you do with your students. We also provide further resources where you can find more historical background information.
Harriet Ann Jacobs (1813-1897) was a women’s activist, abolitionist and writer. Her most well-known work is the book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, published in 1861. Born to two mulatto parents, Delilah and Daniel Jacobs, Harriet was raised by her mother until her death in 1819.

“When I was six years old, my mother died; and then, for the first time, I learned, by the talk around me, that I was a slave”
— Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the life of a Slave Girl*

When her mother passed, Harriet fell under the ownership of her mother’s mistress, Margaret Horniblow. It was under her care and teaching that Harriet learned to read, write and sew. Upon the death of her mistress, 12 year old Harriet was willed to Margaret’s niece; the daughter of Dr. James Norcomb.

During her years of servitude to the Norcomb family, her master began to sexually harass her; which in turn, brought unwarranted cruelty and abuse from her mistress. In an attempt to gain her freedom from the Norcombs, Harriet consented to a relationship with a young white lawyer from the North, Samuel Sawyer. By 1835, Harriet bore two of Sawyer’s children. Although jealous and enraged, Norcomb would not retaliate by selling her. Instead, he threatened Harriet with selling her children if she would not accept his advances. In order to preserve the safety of her family and her dignity, she decided to take her children and run. Harriet hid in the small attic of a storage shed for seven years and watched her children grow from a distance. Leaving her children in the care of her grandmother, she escaped by boat to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1842.

After living in Philadelphia for a short time as a runaway, Harriet moved to New York where she was joined by her children. With the encouragement and support of fellow feminists and abolitionists, Harriet began to write about her life as a slave and the sexual abuse of African American women in the South. Her story was published as a series of essays in the *New York Tribune* until their graphic content was considered too controversial for the average reader. After the cancellation, Harriet encountered considerable difficulty in selling the completed manuscript. But in 1861, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* was finally printed and distributed by a Boston publisher.
HARRIET’S CHOICES

EVERYDAY WE ARE FACED WITH CHOICES TO MAKE.
Some choices are strictly made based on what we want or need. Others are made based on the rules and consequences of what a community or society dictates. In Harriet’s world, there are different types of social constraints that affect the choices she makes. Here are some to consider:

SEXUAL POLITICS
Sexual politics refers to the societal rules (spoken and unspoken) governing relationships between the sexes. In Harriet Jacobs the sexual politics under the institution of slavery dictated that a slave owner was entitled to use his property in any way he saw fit. Slaves (both men and women) were expected to understand their place as property and submit to the will of their master without question. Anyone who did not obey was subject to severe punishment or death. Therefore, many slaves had no other choice than to be subjected to sexual abuse.

As a slave, Harriet understood that her body was not her own. In spite of the risk, Harriet would not give in to the advances of her master. However, she would not be able to refuse him forever and consented to a relationship with another white man whom she believed would offer protection and possibly freedom. Harriet had to determine whether escaping from the cruelty that governed her was worth compromising herself.

THE CHOICE TO HIDE
When her children were put in danger, Harriet decided to flee the Norcomb’s and hide. She remained in hiding for seven years. When faced with the choice to give in to sexual abuse or sacrifice her children, hiding—in spite of its extreme difficulty—was the option she created for herself.

As you watch the play, consider the very specific choices she makes in her relationships with Tom, Grandma, Master Norcomb and Samuel Sawyer.

• When are her choices limited by circumstance?
• When does she rise above her circumstances?

Think about how you make some of the difficult choices you are faced with.

• What motivates you to choose one option over another or create a path of your own?
After the struggle of seven years of hiding and running, Harriet was finally free to live her life without the threat of pursuit or persecution. However in the midst of her newfound freedom in Philadelphia, Harriet realized that there was a great deal of ignorance regarding the condition of female slaves. During the Civil War she went back to the South to work with black refugees behind Union lines and reported what she saw in the northern press. With the encouragement of friends, Harriet overcame her shame and published several articles as well as a narrative in order to educate those in the North. She did not merely escape to freedom, she used every challenge she faced to motivate the telling of her story and the story of thousands of black women in the South. She reclaimed the voice that she had to silence for so many years. As a result, we are discussing her activism and her story today.

**ACTIVISM**

*What are some ways that you could use challenges in your life to educate and inspire others?*
WHY DOES HARRIET TALK TO THE AUDIENCE?

Harriet Jacob’s narrative, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, was written as a commentary on the conditions of African American women under the institution of slavery. Her goal was to compel white middle-class society and potential abolitionists to understand the atrocities and crimes committed against female slaves. Harriet was essentially talking to the reader from the pages of her book, which is why the playwright chose to have her talk to the audience.

WHAT ROLE DO SLAVE NARRATIVES AND SPIRITUALS PLAY IN THE STORY?

In addition to Harriet’s story, the narratives of other slaves are included in the play. There are also spirituals intertwined with the story telling. We spoke with the playwright, LYDIA DIAMOND to uncover the significance of these additions.

LYDIA DIAMOND: *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* is actually one long slave narrative. The addition of other narratives is a means for providing the audience with context for Harriet’s story. They paint a picture of the reality she is living in and the atrocities she is pleading with the audience to understand. The narratives also present characters with a fortitude and ingenuity... a sense of survival and more agency than slaves are typically depicted with.

The spirituals are another piece of the fabric of the reality of slavery. They’re haunting and beautiful and they served so many different purposes. Spirituals were used as a means of communication—outlining escape routes in the lyrics—and as preservation of a spiritual identity. In the play, they function to move the action along with their rhythm and again, provide context for Harriet’s story.
SET AND COSTUME DESIGN

*Harriet Jacobs* is set in the late 1800’s. Therefore one might expect to see all the traditional trappings and fashions of that period in the set and costume design. However, the choice was made to create an environment that is very simple and somewhat abstract. We spoke with director, **HALLIE GORDON** to discuss the more skeletal approach to the set and costumes.

**HALLIE GORDON:** The main idea is that we are not trying to recreate the situations from the book. The play is set in Harriet’s memory. The design choices reflect what it feels like to remember our stories. It’s more of a skeletal recollection than a fully realized representation of the environment and the people in it.

We also wanted to contextualize the story. It’s not just something that happened a long time ago. It is something so severe that our lives are still shaped and affected by it today. We did not want the setting of the period to distract the audience from the message in the play.
POST-SHOW QUESTIONS

THE STORY...
• What do you think was the most unique or interesting thing about Harriet?
• Why didn’t Dr. Norcomb force himself on Harriet?
• Why does Harriet choose to go with Sawyer?
• What does Harriet want us to understand about the choices she makes?
• Was Harriet’s choice to go into hiding brave or irresponsible? Why?

PRODUCTION CHOICES...
• In what ways do you think music is meaningful to African American culture?
• What does music add to the play?
• How do the slave narratives contribute to Harriet’s story?
• Why do you think the playwright and director decided on an all-black cast?
• How did the set and costume design make you think about the setting of the story and the characters?

ABOUT YOU...
• What do you own?
• What are some motivators or circumstances that affect the choices you make?
• Do you think people are defined by the choices they make?
• What sacrifices would you make for your family?
• What would you be willing to compromise to improve your life? What would you not be willing to compromise?

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RESOURCES

If you would like to learn more about the institution of slavery, Harriet Jacobs and other authors like her or the origin of spirituals, check out these resources.

_**Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl**_  
by Harriet Jacobs  
Published in 1861 by Harriet Jacobs, using the pen name “Linda Brent,” _Incidents_ is considered a work of feminist literature. On one level it chronicles the experiences of Harriet Jacobs and the mistreatment she had to endure under the institution of slavery. It then goes further to examine the abuse and mistreatment of slave women as a national issue.

_**Harriet Jacobs: A Life**_  
by Jean Fagan Yellin  
A biography of Harriet Jacobs, which includes historical and rare family photographs. It chronicles her life from slavery to activism.

PBS special: **Africans in America**  
[www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/home.html)  
America’s journey through slavery is presented in four parts. For each era, you’ll find a historical Narrative, a Resource Bank of images, documents, stories, biographies, and commentaries, and a Teacher’s Guide for using the content of the Web site and television series in U.S. history courses.

You can find Harriet Jacobs at  

NY Public Library: **African American Women Writers of the 19th Century**  
[diigital.nypl.org/schomburg/writers_aa19/toc.html](http://digital.nypl.org/schomburg/writers_aa19/toc.html)  
The nineteenth century was a formative period in African-American literary and cultural history. Law and practice forbade teaching blacks from learning to read or write. Nevertheless, black men and women of the nineteenth century learned to both read and write. Moreover, more African-Americans than we yet realize turned their observations, feelings, social viewpoints, and creative impulses into published works. In time, this nineteenth-century printed record included poetry, short stories, histories, narratives, novels, autobiographies, social criticism, and theology, as well as economic and philosophical treatises.

Sweet Chariot: **The Story of the Spirituals**  
[ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Religion/praise.cfm](http://ctl.du.edu/spirituals/Religion/praise.cfm)  
This multimedia website is supported by the Center for Teaching & Learning at the University of Denver. In addition to outlining various cultural and historical influences of the spirituals, this site also includes selected samples of interviews conducted with performing artists, community workers and composers around the country who have shared The Spirituals Project’s mission of keeping the spirituals tradition alive in the twenty-first century. The oral history project has been supported by the LEF Foundation and the Union Institute and University.

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“The war of my life had begun: and though one of God's most powerless creatures, I resolved never to be conquered.” — Harriet Ann Jacobs

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