A NEW PLAY BY MAT SMART
DIRECTED BY RON OJ PARSON
FEATURING SAMUEL G. ROBERSON JR. & CLIFF CHAMBERLAIN

STEPPENWOLF FOR YOUNG ADULTS PRESENTS

SAMUEL J. AND K.

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STUDY GUIDE
TABLE OF CONTENTS

1 Introduction
2-3 In-classroom exercises
4 Character descriptions
5 Introducing the actors behind Samuel J. and K.
6 From Naperville, Illinois to Yaoundé, Cameroon
7 Contextual Information: Adoption and citizenship in Cameroon
8-12 Theme #1: What does it mean to be brothers?
14-19 Theme #2: Tracing your roots
20-26 The Writer’s Process
28-30 Interview with playwright Mat Smart
31-33 Interview with director Ron OJ Parson
35 The Scene: Steppenwolf’s teen series
36 Get involved in Steppenwolf’s Young Adult Council
37 Acknowledgements
Two brothers. Same first name. Different journeys.

In Steppenwolf for Young Adults' production of Samuel J. and K., two brothers are forced to confront their complicated relationship after a bitter dispute separates them for seven years. The play explores questions of brotherhood and identity through Samuel J. and Samuel K.'s tumultuous relationship, and asks us to look honestly at what we need and expect from one another. Adopted from Cameroon at the age of three, Samuel K. wants to lead a normal American life and leave his birthplace behind. His older brother Samuel J. pushes him to explore his Cameroonian identity and in the process, discovers a home for himself. This study guide will focus on two core themes:

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BROTHERS?
Samuel K. was adopted from Cameroon, but Samuel J. has always considered him his brother—no questions asked. But during the play's climatic scene Samuel K. casts doubt on that assumption. This study guide will take an honest look at sibling relationships and rivalries, and what we are to learn from Samuel J. and K.'s falling out and reconciliation.

IDENTITY: TRACING YOUR ROOTS
Samuel J. cannot understand why his adoptive brother is so dismissive of his birthplace, and in turn, Samuel K. cannot understand why his brother is so insistent on exploring it. In this study guide we will consider what it means to explore your roots and why some people shy away from that experience while others embrace it.

Samuel J. and K. is also a new play, only produced once before at Williamstown Theatre Festival during the summer of 2010. Since that production the script has gone through heavy revisions, and will continue to be changed and sculpted throughout the rehearsal process. Producing a new and evolving work is an entirely different experience than producing a classic extant play, and this study guide will walk you through that exciting process. See some of the major changes playwright Mat Smart made to the script during Steppenwolf’s week-long workshop, and how those changes affect the arc of the play.
IN-CLASSROOM EXERCISES

THE WRITER’S PROCESS: CRAFTING A STORY

Mat Smart is a young writer who took pieces from his own life and combined them with imaginative storytelling to create *Samuel J. and K.* Have your students participate in the following exercises so they may better understand the playwright’s creative process.

**ACTIVITY #1:**
**WRITING THROUGH IMAGINATION & PERSONAL EXPERIENCE**

**Estimated Time:**
30 minutes

**DESCRIPTION:**
Mat Smart does not have an adoptive brother from Cameroon, but he did take a trip to Cameroon after his college graduation. Ask your students to think about special places in the world that mean something to them, either because the place is significant in their lives and/or very unique.

Give your students five minutes to write down 2-3 places that fit the above description. They do not need to describe the places in great detail; one or two sentences will be plenty. It may be helpful to provide an example (e.g. for playwright Mat Smart, Cameroon was both a unique and meaningful location).

Next, ask students to think about 2-3 fictional conflicts. These conflicts can be anything at all—e.g. two sisters have a fight over their favorite shirt, two friends have a disagreement over which movie to see. Have students spend 5 minutes writing these “conflict scenarios” down on a piece of paper.

Finally, ask students to lay one of the “conflict scenarios” on top of one of their personal meaningful locations. This way, the newly formed story will be part personal narrative and part fiction. Give the students 20 minutes to flesh out the story.

After giving students time to write, reflect as a class: What did you notice about the writing process? Did the real-life location make the fiction conflict feel more authentic?

See pages 28-30 for more information on Mat Smart’s experience in Cameroon!
THE WRITER’S PROCESS: CRAFTING A STORY

ACTIVITY #2:
WRITING THROUGH CONTEXTUAL RESEARCH & PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Estimated Time:
At home research/ 30 minutes of in-class time

DESCRIPTION:
Have students look through the travel sections of various newspapers and pick a place they’ve never been but would like to visit. Then, allow students to spend time researching their chosen place, either at home or in the computer lab. What is the language, culture, industry and geography of this place? How is it different from Chicago? How is it similar?

Once students have completed their contextual research, have them write down five moments of conflict they have recently experienced. These moments may be big dramatic moments of conflict, or small moments of conflict that were easily resolved through conversation. What happens if one of those conflicts is placed in the foreign location? How would the characters react in this completely different setting? Give students 20 minutes to write a scene that uses their real-life conflict, but takes place in their foreign location.

After giving students time to write, reflect as a class: What did you notice about the research process? Did the quality of your real-life conflict change with the introduction of a foreign location?

ACTIVITY #3:
CREATING A STORY VISUALLY

Estimated Time:
30 minutes

DESCRIPTION:
Ask your students to pick either their story from Activity #1 or their scene from Activity # 2. What might that conflict look like if we were to see an visual representation of it? Would it be two-dimensional or three-dimensional? (Example: Would it be a painting or a sculpture?) How would color affect the piece? (Example: What does it mean to use grays and blacks as opposed to red and yellows?) Would it be sparse or busy? (Example: What happens if most of the picture is white, unused space?) Would you choose to portray the incident in a realistic or abstract way? (Example: Would the artwork be a physical representation of the story? Or a representation of how the story made you feel?) What emotions would the picture evoke?

Give students 25 minutes to create this visual image. They can choose to draw a picture, create a collage, or (if material is available) create a 3-dimensional object, such as a sculpture.

After each student creates a piece, have the class walk around the room and view each other’s work. This is an observation exercise. Students should not judge whether the work is good or bad, but rather what choices the artist made to communicate his/her story.

Bring the class back for a group discussion. What did you notice about your classmates’ work? What choices did your classmates make to effectively communicate their stories? What questions do you have after viewing each other’s work? Do you want to know more about these stories?

In Steppenwolf’s production of *Samuel J. and K.*, director Ron O’J Parson will make conscience choices that will affect the audience’s experience of the play. See pages 31-33 for an interview with the director!
Other Characters in Samuel J. and K.

But isn’t this a two person play? There are many characters in *Samuel J. and K.* that play significant parts in the story without ever appearing onstage.

**Dilenia** is Samuel K.’s girlfriend at the start of the play. She pushes him to consider their future, even though he has a hard time deciding what to eat for breakfast. At the top of the play we learn that Samuel J. suggested to Dilenia that she and his brother break it off, as they both make each other miserable because they want different things. Samuel K. saw this as a severe betrayal, and didn’t speak to his brother for three months.

**“Moms,”** or Denise Jackson Sanders, is Samuel K’s biological mother and Samuel J.’s adoptive mother. She wants the best for both of her boys and is extremely proud of Samuel J. for graduating college. Samuel K. is convinced his mother is disappointed in his lifestyle, and cannot conceal his jealousy that Samuel J. might be the favored son. By the end of the play Mom is in a nursing home suffering from advanced Alzheimer’s, and Samuel J. is her sole caretaker.

**Abena** is Samuel K.’s wife, who he met while working on a farm after he decided to stay in Cameroon. Abena’s family is Cameroonian, and her dad has become like a father to Samuel K. They have a son together named Mwanze, and it is clear from the way Samuel K. speaks to her on the phone that he has grown up since his relationship with Dilenia, and loves Abena very much.

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**Samuel K.**

played by Samuel G. Roberson Jr.

Samuel K. Sanders was born in Yaoundé, Cameroon. Orphaned by his parents on the steps of a church, he was adopted at the age of three by Denise Jackson Sanders (Samuel J.’s biological mother). Samuel K. has grown up in Naperville with his brother and mom and considers himself an American, and he had no desire to travel to his birth country before Samuel J. gave him a plane ticket to Cameroon. Traveling to Cameroon raises difficult questions for Samuel K. that he is not yet ready to face, and he makes it clear to his brother that the trip is not a mission to find his biological parents.

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**Samuel J.**

played by Cliff Chamberlain

Samuel J. Sanders was born in Naperville, Illinois. His dad left when he was young and he has been raised by his single mom alongside his adoptive brother, Samuel K. Samuel J. did not finish college and now works at an Arboretum for close to minimum wage. He saved money for two years in order to buy himself and Samuel K. tickets to Cameroon, as he’s always been curious about Samuel K.’s past and cannot understand his brother’s indifference toward his own roots. After the brothers have a fight on the last night of their trip, Samuel J. decides to stay in Cameroon and make a life there.
Cliff Chamberlain and Samuel G. Roberson, Jr. reflect on their sibling relationships.

CLIFF CHAMBERLAIN:
It's one of life's greatest practical jokes: when the little brother is three inches taller than the big brother. That's how it is with me and my younger brother, though it's hard to say "little" when I'm clearly shorter than him.

But in a way it fits, because I look up to my younger brother in a ton of ways. He is gregarious, kind, thoughtful, adventurous, and just flat out cool. As the older brother, it's been amazingly rewarding to watch my brother grow up into the man he's become, to be proud of his accomplishments and be in awe of his talents. Because let's face it, just because you're family doesn't necessarily means you're friends. When you're kids it's pretty easy. You play basketball, you watch cartoons, you eat at the children's table together at Thanksgiving. It's not hard to get along.

But as you grow into adults, personalities start to emerge, you each take different routes in life and it becomes a bit of a challenge to stay close to your siblings. But my brother and I are lucky in that we both really like each other. Still. To this day. We're best friends. And I think I can boil down our friendship to two words: road trip. We drove across the country, just the two of us, for five weeks in the summer of 2002. I was twenty-two and he was twenty-one. We were right on the precipice of becoming adults and by the end of the trip we could finish each other's sentences and read each other's minds. We could tell each other a joke without saying a word. I've never experienced that kind of connection with anybody in my life. It created a foundation for us that exists to this day, so that even now, with me living in Chicago and Travis living in Montana, we remain as close as we did when we were in bunk-beds.

SAMUEL G. ROBERSON JR.:
I don't have a brother but I am the oldest of three sisters so I know what it means to be a sibling. Being the big brother is never easy because you carry the responsibility of setting the example for your younger siblings. But setting the example doesn't mean that they have to follow and it doesn't mean that you will actually get along. Everything hurts more when love is involved and I love my sisters very much, but we fought like cats and dogs. It wasn't until I moved away that it became more about the love than fighting because we weren't in the same place to actually fight. Now we are closer than ever, even though we live in different states. And while I have never had a brother I wouldn't trade my sisters for the world.
It goes without saying that Naperville, Illinois and Yaoundé, Cameroon are two very different places.

In addition to being more than 6,500 miles apart, Naperville and Yaoundé have extremely different demographics, geography, history and traditions.

And yet despite all odds, Samuel J. and Samuel K. are brothers whose roots respectively trace back to these vastly different places.

**Naperville, Illinois**
A suburb of Chicago with just under 150,000 residents, Naperville is actually the 5th largest city in the state. 82 percent of residents are Caucasian, 12.5 percent Asian American, 2.5 percent African American and 3 percent are other races. Just under half of the households in Naperville include children under the age of 18, and 70 percent of all households include married couples living together. With a median family household income of over $120,000 annually, Naperville is one of the most affluent suburbs in Illinois. It is also home to three public libraries, an independent film festival and eight different Universities or University satellites. In 2006, *Money Magazine* named Naperville the second best place to live in the United States.

**Yaoundé, Cameroon**
The bustling capital of The Republic of Cameroon, Yaoundé is home to approximately 1.1 million residents, most of whom speak both English and French. Originally settled by German ivory traders in 1888, Yaoundé was taken over by the French following Germany's defeat in WWI. In 1960 The Republic of Cameroon became an independent state and has since enjoyed relative economic and political stability compared to its neighboring countries (Nigeria to the west, Chad to the northeast, the Central African Republic to the east and the Republic of the Congo to the south). Yaoundé is located in the country’s Centre region, Cameroon’s intellectual and cultural hub. The city is home to large colorful outdoor markets, a soccer stadium and numerous museums and universities (including The University of Yaoundé, the country’s most important higher education institution) and enjoys a temperate tropical climate with a lengthy rainy season. The main industries in Yaoundé are food and timber processing, brick making, construction and artisan trades such as pottery. Directly outside of Yaoundé lives a thriving population of farmers, who produce foods like plantains, groundnuts, yams, tropical fruits and livestock that are processed and sold in the capital.
ADOPTING A CHILD FROM CAMEROON:

What would “moms” have needed to do to adopt Samuel K. from Cameroon today?

Before adopting a child from another country, a person or couple must be found eligible by the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). In addition to meeting U.S. adoption requirements, adoptive parents must also meet the requirements set by the child’s birthplace—in this case, Cameroon.

Cameroon’s government is very specific about who can and cannot adopt a child. Prior to issuing an adoption decree, a couple must prove their residency and meet age, marriage and income requirements. For a married couple, at least one parent must be older than 40 years of age. If neither parent meets that age requirement, at least one parent must be 35 years of age and the couple must have been married for ten years. If a couple does not meet either of these requirements, they must present proof of infertility. In the event that a single parent like Samuel K.’s mom wants to adopt a child from Cameroon, the age and income requirements are even stricter.

Samuel K. would also need to be declared an orphan by U.S. immigration law before being adopted. The law states that in order to be adopted a child must have no parents because of death, desertion, or disappearance or have parents that are unable to care for him/her and therefore voluntarily released the child (in writing) for adoption. Since Cameroon does not have any formal adoption service agencies, an orphanage has the power to release a child for adoption.

The process of adopting a child from Cameroon:

1. Choose an Adoption Service Provider
2. Apply to be Found Eligible to Adopt
3. Be Matched with a Child
4. Adopt the Child in Cameroon
5. Apply for the Child to be Found Eligible for Adoption
6. Bring Your Child Home

The entire process to takes a minimum of three months and can cost thousands of dollars.

BECOMING A CAMEROONIAN CITIZEN:

Samuel J.’s Journey to Cameroonian Citizenship

The process of applying for legal Cameroonian citizenship is difficult and complicated, much like applying for citizenship in the United States. The easiest path to citizenship is for a female to marry a male citizen of Cameroon. If a male marries a female Cameroonian, citizenship is possible but not guaranteed. And while an unmarried person living and working in Cameroon for an extended time is eligible to apply for citizenship, that process is laden with obstacles and complicated paperwork.

The Cameroonian government also does not recognize dual citizenship between the U.S. and Cameroon, so U.S. citizens who want to settle in Cameroon are forced to give up their U.S. citizenship (just like Samuel J. does in the play).

When officially filing for citizenship, all forms must be completed and filed at an immigration office in Cameroon and documents such as a birth certificate, photo identification and proof of residence/marriage are required.
As they grow older, Samuel J. and Samuel K.’s separate paths become more and more obvious: While they’ve always had different skin colors and different birthplaces, Samuel K.’s ability to finish college and his generally responsible lifestyle make Samuel J. insecure about his own unconventional journey. This competition and rivalry finds an outlet on the basketball court during the play’s first scene, right before Samuel K’s college graduation:

**What does it mean to be brothers?**

During the play, Samuel J. and Samuel K. confront difficult questions about their friendship and brotherhood. While not related by blood, the boys grew up together in the same house and experience the same sibling rivalry, love and jealousy as biological brothers. But what responsibility do brothers have to each other, adoptive or biological? And how should that loyalty evolve in the face of conflict and growing up?

**Competition & Sibling Rivalry**

As they grow older, Samuel J. and Samuel K.’s separate paths become more and more obvious: While they’ve always had different skin colors and different birthplaces, Samuel K.’s ability to finish college and his generally responsible lifestyle make Samuel J. insecure about his own unconventional journey. This competition and rivalry finds an outlet on the basketball court during the play’s first scene, right before Samuel K’s college graduation:

- **Samuel J**: Moms brags about you, she doesn't brag about me.
- **Samuel K**: Moms talks about you non-stop.
- **Samuel J**: Because it drives her absolutely insane that I'm almost thirty and I'm working at the Arboretum making ten dollars an hour.
- **Samuel K**: You got a raise?
- **Samuel J**: Yes I got a raise! Because it's the first thing I've ever liked doing. I like being outside all day. I like laying sod and pruning and tilling and not having to deal with people. What's wrong with that?
- **Samuel K**: There's nothing wrong with that.
- **Samuel J**: Except that it like, humiliates you and moms.

**Questions for the Classroom**

- Why do you think Samuel J.'s success negatively affects his older brother?
- Do you think the fact that Samuel J. and Samuel K. are adoptive brothers as opposed to biological brothers affects their sibling rivalry?

**Making it personal:** Have you ever felt jealousy for a sibling? If so, what do you think that jealousy stemmed from? How did you deal with it?

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**Proverb**

A brother is a friend God gave you; A friend is a brother your heart chose.
SIBLING LOYALTY

Despite the inherent competition, the sibling relationships can also be defined by extreme loyalty and devotion. The phrase “he’s like my brother” implies a closeness and mutual responsibility that is emulated in normal friendships. Being a brother is a role that Samuel J. takes very seriously, and he expects his brother to feel the same way. But what happens when that loyalty is thrown into question by a breach of trust? Midway through the play’s first scene, Samuel J. confronts his brother about something Samuel K. said to his girlfriend, Dilenia, three months earlier:

**Samuel J:** Could you do me a favor and not give my girlfriend a PowerPoint presentation about how her and I are ruining each other’s lives?

**Samuel K:** I didn’t give her a PowerPoint presentation.

**Samuel J:** She said you had lists!

**Samuel K:** You two make each other miserable!

**Samuel J:** No, we don’t.

**Samuel K:** And then you make me miserable!

**Samuel J:** Dilenia and I have our good days.

**Samuel K:** Oh my god.

**Samuel J:** Just stay out of it, ok?

The fact that Samuel K. would try to convince Dilenia to end the relationship really hurts Samuel J. He cannot believe his little brother would go behind his back and speak badly about him, even if he had the best intentions. To Samuel J., brotherhood comes first before anything else and Samuel K. broke that protocol.

**?’S FOR THE CLASSROOM:**

- Do you think Samuel K. had a right to speak to his brother’s girlfriend about their relationship, if he really did believe they were wrong for each other? Or is that crossing the line?
- Do you think a brother’s loyalty is different than the loyalty of a close friend? Why or why not?

**Making it personal:** Has your sibling ever done something to break your trust? If so, how did you two recover from that?
THEME #1: WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE BROTHERS?

A BROTHER’S BETRAYAL

Sibling or no, every relationship has its breaking point. There are certain betrayals that cut deeper than others and during Samuel J. and K. the audience witnesses a betrayal so devastating that it almost ends the brothers’ relationship. During their last night in Cameroon, Samuel K. confesses to Samuel J. that he's always been in love with Dilenia. However, this revelation is not what upsets Samuel J. the most. In the heat of their fight, Samuel K. denies their brotherhood - an offence that hurts Samuel J. to his core.

**Samuel K:** I was gonna tell you as soon as we got home.

**Samuel J:** Are you kidding me!–this week has been like–the best of my life–and this whole time you've been lying to me? And all this “you should break up with her, I want you to be happy” stuff–that was all because you wanted to–

**Samuel K:** It's not like that.

**Samuel J:** Who are you?

**Samuel K:** Just calm down for a–

**Samuel J:** You're my brother! You can't betray me for her. For Dilenia? You can't! You can't! You–

**Samuel K:** C'mon J! We're not even really brothers.

With this statement, Samuel K. denies the relationship he and Samuel J. have shared for their entire lives. Even though they are not related by blood, Samuel J. has always considered Samuel K. a brother. And now, that assumption is thrown into question. “Never–never–in my entire life have I even thought what you just said,” Samuel J. tells his brother before he walks out the door. Though Samuel K. may not have meant what he said, he hurts his brother so deeply that Samuel J. does not return home for seven years.

**’S FOR THE CLASSROOM:**

- Do you understand why Samuel J. got as angry as he did? Do you think it follows that he does not return home for seven years?
- What do you think the confrontation reveals about how Samuel J. feels about his brother?
- Do you think people should always be held accountable for things they say at in the heat of an argument?

**Making it personal:** If you were in Samuel J.'s shoes, could you forgive Samuel K.?
FAMOUS SIBLINGS

Sibling relationships are great fodder for compelling drama. Take a look at some of literature and pop culture's favorite sibling relationships. Do you think these stories at all resemble Samuel J. and Samuel K.'s relationship?

**Cain and Abel:** In the Biblical story Cain commits the first murder by killing his younger brother Abel out of jealousy, after God rejects his offering but accepts his brother's.

**Gonreil, Regan and Cordelia in Shakespeare's *King Lear***: When King Lear decides to divide up his kingdom, his three daughters are forced to compete for his love. But only the youngest (Cordelia) has her heart in the right place.

**The Godfather's Michael and Fredo Corleone:** In one of film's most notorious sibling rivalries, Michael and Fredo Corleone navigate brotherhood, crime and betrayal in Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*.

**Lisa and Bart Simpson:** The studious goody-two-shoes sister and her trouble-making brother have entertained TV audiences for over 20 years.

**Linus and Lucy:** The meek, blanket-toting Linus often submitted to his bossy sister's bullying during *Peanuts* 50 year run as America's favorite comic strip.

REAL-WORLD SIBLING RIVALRIES

The media is often fascinated with real-life sibling rivalries, particularly when the siblings are competing in the same industry. Take a look at these famous siblings, who somehow manage to exist in the same profession:

**The Manning brothers:** Just like Samuel J. and Samuel K., Peyton and Eli Manning are big sports buffs: Both play in the NFL, Peyton for the Indianapolis Colts and Eli for the New York Giants.

**Venus and Serena Williams:** Tennis champions Venus and Serena Williams have faced off against each other 23 times during their tennis careers. Despite their professional rivalry, the sisters remain close.

**Anne Landers and Dear Abby:** Anne Landers (whose real name was Eppie Lederer) and her sister Pauline Phillips (known as Dear Abby) wrote competing advice columns for almost 40 years. The competition led to a long estrangement between the two sisters, though eventually they did reconcile.

**John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy:** Robert F. Kennedy served under his brother, John F. Kennedy, as U.S. Attorney General from 1961-1963, and continued to serve for 9 months after his brother was assassinated. Robert later ran for president himself in 1968, but was shot and killed while campaigning in California.

It snowed last year: I made a snowman and my brother knocked it down and I knocked my brother down and then we had tea.

Dylan Thomas
STEPPENWOLF’S SIBLING RIVALRIES

Check out photos from past Steppenwolf productions that centered on sibling relationships

In Tarell Alvin McCraney’s The Brother Size, Oshooshie gets out of prison and comes to live at his brother Ogun’s house. Though Ogun tries to keep his brother out of trouble, by the end of the play Oshooshie finds himself in hot water again.

In Martin McDonagh’s The Pillowman, a writer is implicated in a series of murders after his mentally disabled brother tells police he was compelled to kill because of his brother’s grisly short stories.

Sibling rivalry is typified in Sam Shepard’s True West, when a Hollywood screenwriter gets overshadowed by his younger brother, who is suddenly asked to write a screenplay in his place.
When Samuel J. first gives his brother a plane ticket to Cameroon, Samuel K. feels bombarded, angry and confused all at once. He’s never thought seriously about returning to Africa and has a strong American identity. After all, he has grown up in Naperville and hasn’t been back to Africa since he was three years old. But despite his brother’s reluctance, Samuel J. pushes Samuel K. to explore his roots.

**Samuel K:** This isn’t some spring break trip! This is the biggest deal in the world and you didn’t even ask me first.

**Samuel J:** I wanted to surprise you.

**Samuel K:** What am I supposed to say? “Thank you, I haven’t been there since I was three—I never thought about going back to Africa—what a great idea.” I was born there, so what? I don’t remember a damn thing about the place. Do you want to spend a week at Edward Hospital to get to know more about “where you come from?”

**Samuel J:** It’s not the same.

Though Samuel K. does agree to accompany his brother to Cameroon, he makes the terms of the trip clear: he does not want to search for his biological parents, and he does not intend to be more than tourist in his birth country. Samuel K. wants the trip to be a vacation, not a journey into his past - but his brother is clearly hoping for something more.

**?S FOR THE CLASSROOM:**
- Why do you think Samuel K. is so resistant to exploring his roots?
- Why do you think Samuel J. is so insistent that he does?
- Do you think that Samuel K. is secure in his American identity?

**Making it personal:** How important do you think it is for a person to understand where he/she comes from? Given Samuel K. was raised in Naperville, do you think it’s important that he explore his African roots?
SAMUEL J.'S FASCINATION WITH HIS BROTHER'S PAST

At the start of the play, it is clear Samuel J. is fascinated by his brother's past and desperate to explore Cameroon with Samuel K. by his side:

Samuel J: You remember—when you first came home—you'd come into my room every night and sleep under my bed? My new brother from Africa—scared of sleeping alone, scared of the vacuum cleaner—spouting off random shit in French in the middle of the night. I thought you were totally crazy.

And like... the coolest thing to ever happen to me.

?S FOR THE CLASSROOM:

• Why do you think Samuel J. is so intrigued by Cameroon? Why do you think he plans the trip in the first place?

Making it personal: Do you think it's a good thing that Samuel J. pushes his brother to explore his roots? Or do you think it's not his place to do so?

GROWING UP IN NAPERVILLE:

SAMUEL K.'S UNLIKELY UPBRINGING

What do you think it was like for Samuel K. to grow up in Naperville, Illinois? Not only is Naperville a majority white neighborhood, but Samuel K. is also a different race than his mother and brother. While it's clear that Samuel K. succeeded in Naperville, do you think that being African affected his upbringing? In what ways? Given Samuel K. does not embrace his Cameroonian roots (at least at the start of the play) how do you think his heritage factors into his personal identity?

Samuel K: I'm twenty-three and it took me a long time to figure out where I belong. I don't want to go backward, okay?

When Samuel J. tells his mother that he and Samuel K. are traveling to Cameroon, her response is layered: though Samuel K. is obviously free to visit his birthplace, his mother would strongly prefer he doesn't:

Samuel J: She told me you can do whatever you want to do, but that it's her preference that you don't go back there until after she's dead.

?S FOR THE CLASSROOM:

• What do you think Samuel K. means when he says, "I don't want to go backward?"
• Why do you think mom has such a strong reaction to the prospect of her boys traveling to Cameroon?
TWO DIFFERENT LENSES

During their trip, Samuel K. sees an old Cameroonian couple at a local fish market. Later that evening he tells his brother how in love the couple seemed, and how moved he was by their affection:

**Samuel K:** ... He puts his hands over her hands... she stops. She looks up. He frowns at her and motions to his lips. She kisses him. And I... and I thought that -

**Samuel J:** That they could be your parents?

**Samuel K:** No, dude! I told you then and I'm telling you now--no. I don't think like that, ok?

**Samuel J:** Sorry.

**Samuel K:** I'm just trying to say that – you know what? Forget it.

**Samuel J:** I'm sorry I interrupted you.

**Samuel K:** When the old lady kissed the old man, you could tell they really loved each other. Really, really loved each other. And it made me think about how things would've been if we had two parents instead of just moms. What if your father was still around when I was around? What would that have been like?

**Samuel J:** Dude, don't even think twice about that guy. I don't.

In this scene, Samuel K. and Samuel J. confront two difficult and complicated issues—the first being that they grew up without a father. The absence of his dad is an issue that Samuel J. avoids entirely, even while pushing Samuel K. to look for his biological parents.

The second issue of course is Samuel K.'s refusal to search for his parents in Cameroon. After seeing the old couple at the fish market, Samuel K. wants to talk to his brother about growing up without a father—but Samuel J. would rather the conversation be about Samuel K.'s biological parents. The brothers are coming to these issues from very different standpoints, and are therefore having difficulty finding common ground.
RAIN ON A TIN ROOF: A MEMORY FROM THE PAST

After telling his brother that he can't remember a single thing from Cameroon, Samuel K. confesses that there is one memory he retains from his infancy in Africa: the sound of rain hitting a tin roof.

Samuel K: I remember one sound. Now I know what it must have been, but for a long time I didn't know what it was, I'd just hear it in my head. At night, usually. When I couldn't.... It starts pretty loud. Then gets quiet. Then stops. .... Rain hitting a tin roof. It's loud enough to wake me up, then it gets quiet, and eventually...stops. No tin roofs in Naperville, Illinois.

?S FOR THE CLASSROOM:

• Why do you think Samuel K. withholds this memory at first? Why doesn't he just come right out and tell his brother that he remembers the rain?
• What do you think it means that Samuel K. retains this memory? And how do you think the memory affected him all these years in Naperville?
RAIN ON A TIN ROOF: A MOMENT IN THE PRESENT

During their last night in Cameroon, Samuel J. and Samuel K. are sleeping under a tin roof in a small hut when it begins to rain. The sound obviously speaks to Samuel K.'s memory from his early life in Cameroon, but he resists making the connection.

**Samuel K:** I know why you're crying.

**Samuel J:** I guarantee you, you don't.

**Samuel K:** You're crying because I'm not crying. You see me—I'm three years old—I'm at the church, sleeping with a bunch of other kids who've been orphaned, abandoned, whatever.

**Samuel J:** I spent two years saving for this trip.

**Samuel K:** Don't have some sort of moment here. It's my place to have a moment and I'm not, so don't have one for me, ok?

**Samuel J:** What are you talking about?

**Samuel K:** You're really pissing me off.

**Samuel J:** I'm not doing anything.

**Samuel K:** Don't cry because of the rain on the tin roof, ok?

Samuel J. is moved by rain on the tin roof, but Samuel K. will not allow himself to get emotional. In this scene the brothers are forced to confront their different objectives for the journey to Cameroon: Samuel K. hoped the trip would simply be a vacation, while Samuel J. wanted it to be a kind of pilgrimage, filled with revelations and meaning for both him and his brother. Samuel J. so badly wants his brother to feel something, but Samuel K. is not ready to face the big questions about his parents, his adoption and his roots in Cameroon. Samuel J. also wants his brother to open up and confide in him about his feelings on being adopted, but Samuel K. is not willing to do that. It's easier for Samuel K. to simply be an American from Naperville, and Samuel J. is complicating things by forcing him to explore his past.

**?S FOR THE CLASSROOM**

- What do you think Samuel K. means by, “Don't have a moment for me?”
- Do you think Samuel J. is crying because, as Samuel K. suggests, he sees his brother as an orphan in Cameroon? Or could he be crying for a different reason?

**Making it personal:** Can you think of a time when you experienced an emotional awakening? Did you share it with another person, or was the moment solitary?
Following your heart can often mean following your roots and your heritage. But for the Samuel J. and Samuel K., the opposite is true. Though Samuel K. was born in Cameroon, he feels connected to his adoptive country, the United States. And conversely Samuel J., who was born in Naperville, finds happiness in his brother’s birthplace. Have the brothers really switched places? Or did they end up right where they were meant to be?

**SWITCHING PLACES: SAMUEL J.’S DECISION TO STAY**

In the middle of the play, Samuel J. makes the decision to stay in Cameroon after he and Samuel K. have a falling out. Samuel J. makes a life for himself there – he marries a Cameroonian woman, works on a farm and has a child of his own. For seven years his brother searches for him, and finally finds him working as a security guard in Yaoundé, the nation’s capital.

When we meet Samuel J. at the end of the play, he is a changed man. In addition to being a father and husband, he has also given up his American citizenship. Though his roots are in America, his home and family are now in Cameroon. Though one might have expected Samuel K., who was actually born in the country, to live out his days in Cameroon—it is his brother who makes a life there.

**?S FOR THE CLASSROOM:**

- Why do you think Samuel J. feels more at home in Cameroon than in the United States?
- Why do you think it was easier for him to settle down there than in America?
- What do Samuel J. and Samuel K.’s journeys tell us about how humans connect (or do not connect) with their roots?

**Making it personal:** Do you connect to where you were born? Or is there another place you feel more at home?
In December, Mat Smart came to Steppenwolf for a week-long workshop of *Samuel J. and K.* During the workshop Mat, with the help of dramaturg Polly Carl and director Ron OJ Parson, made significant changes to the script that allowed him to realize his vision for the play. Take a look at some of the changes made to the script during the workshop process. Do you think these changes clarified the story and furthered the themes and ideas in Mat’s play?
DUNKIN DONUTS MONOLOGUE: IN OR OUT?

When *Samuel J. and K.* received its world premiere at Williamstown Theater Festival, the script included a monologue during which Samuel J. explained his paralyzing inability to make decisions. Take a look at this scene, taken from the August 5th, 2010 production draft:

**ACT I, SCENE I (PAGE 19)**

**Samuel J:** I’m not ready for anything. I go to the Dunkin Donuts drive-thru on my way out to Lisle in the morning and I’m like never even ready to order. “May I take your order?” Whoop – my mind goes blank. I know I’m hungry, but do I want a doughnut, a muffin or a breakfast sandwich? And then what kind of doughnut? What kind of muffin? Sometimes I have to say, “you know what? I’m just gonna park and come in.”

However, the draft that Mat brought to the first day of Steppenwolf’s workshop did not include the Dunkin Donuts monologue. Mat had cut it out so that the action could move quicker, and focus more narrowly on the brother’s impending trip to Cameroon rather than on Samuel J.’s personal struggle. However, everyone in the room missed the monologue, because it really revealed something true about Samuel J.’s character audience. By the end of the workshop week, Mat had put the Dunkin Donuts monologue back into the script.

**?’S FOR THE CLASSROOM**

What exactly do we learn about Samuel J. through the Dunkin Donuts monologue?
Do you agree with Mat’s decision to put the monologue back into the script?

**From the Playwright:** “I initially took out the Dunkin Donuts monologue because I thought it was stopping the action of the play just to tell a funny story. However, once I heard it without the monologue, I realized that it lets us see why J. is truly out-of-place in the suburbs. It also, in a small way, prepares us for Samuel J.’s choice at the end of Act One, when he tells the grumpy man in Dunkin Donuts, Its people like you that make me want to live on a deserted island.”

Question:
What’s a dramaturg?

Answer:
When developing a new play, the dramaturg helps the writer mold and shape his or her play, so that the story the playwright wants to tell comes through clearly. The dramaturg may make suggestions about plot and character, do research for the playwright or simply offer a fresh set of eyes.
At the start of the Samuel J. and K. workshop, the script indicated that Samuel K. had expressed his feelings for Dilenia three months earlier, and actually encouraged her to break up with his brother and date him instead. Take a look at this scene on the basketball court right before Samuel K.’s graduation, taken from the November 29th, 2010 draft:

**ACT I SCENE I (PAGE 17)**

*Samuel J*: Let’s go to your stupid graduation then. But could you do me a favor and not give my girlfriend a Powerpoint presentation on why she should dump me and date you.

*Samuel K*: I didn’t give her a Powerpoint presentation.

*Samuel J*: She said you had lists!

*Samuel K*: This isn’t about Dilenia!

*Samuel J*: I told her not to come today, but she’s gonna be there because she think we all need to put this behind us.
During the workshop however, Mat made the decision to change the backstory between Samuel K. and Dilenia. Instead of suggesting she break up with his brother to date him instead, in the newer draft Samuel K. now suggests that Dileenia end things with his brother simply because they make each other unhappy. Take a look at this scene, taken from the December 3rd, 2010 draft:

**ACT I SCENE I (PAGE 16)**

**Samuel J:** Let’s go to your stupid graduation then. But could you do me a favor and not give my girlfriend a Powerpoint presentation about how her and I are ruining each other’s lives.

**Samuel K:** I didn't give her a Powerpoint presentation.

**Samuel J:** She said you had lists!

**Samuel K:** You two make each other miserable!

**Samuel J:** No, we don’t.

**Samuel K:** And then you make me miserable!

**Samuel J:** Dilenia and I have our good days.

Mat felt that the change made Samuel K.’s motives seem less malicious, given he is just looking out for his brother’s happiness as opposed to trying to steal his girlfriend. Even though the conversation still makes Samuel J. upset, the issue becomes more about Samuel K. meddling in his business than betraying him outright. It also allows for a moment of dramatic surprise later in the play, when Samuel K. reveals that he does actually have feelings for Dilenia.

*’S FOR THE CLASSROOM*

Do you think this script change significantly alters Samuel K.’s character?
The script performed at Williamstown Theater Festival ended with Samuel J. coming back to Naperville after seven years in Cameroon. He arrives unannounced after years of silence, and wants to reconcile with his brother. Take a look at this scene from the August 5th, 2010 draft. It takes place in Naperville at Samuel J. and Samuel K.’s childhood home:

**ACT II SCENE I (PAGE 57)**

**Samuel J:** You still go by Samuel?

**Samuel K:** Sam or Samuel.

**Samuel J:** I’m sorry.

**Samuel K:** You know, that’s okay. Just seven years. It’s cool. Don’t worry about it.

**Samuel J:** I’m sorry, Samuel.

**Samuel K:** Are you in trouble or something?

**Samuel J:** No.

**Samuel K:** You need money? What?

**Samuel J:** No.

**Samuel K:** You must need something if you came all this way.
Throughout the workshop however, Mat changed and molded the ending of the play to emphasize Samuel K.’s deep commitment to his brother. While the older draft suggested that Samuel K. harbored a lot of anger towards Samuel J. for leaving, the new draft suggests something else entirely: that Samuel K. truly misses his brother, feels guilty about what happened with Dilenia, and has consequently spent the last seven years searching for Samuel J. Instead of Samuel J. coming to Naperville, it is Samuel K. who travels to Cameroon to apologize to his brother. Take a look at the dialogue below, taken from the December 3rd, 2010 draft:

**ACT II SCENE I (PAGE 54)**

**Samuel J:** How did you find me?

**Samuel K:** How do you think? ... I lose my keys.

**Samuel J:** ... What?

**Samuel K:** I lost my keys. I lose my keys all the time. Turn the house upside down looking for them. Retrace my steps – retrace everywhere I went – everything I thought – “where did I come from? – “where am I going?” – until finally... there they are.

**Samuel J:** I don’t understand.

**Samuel K:** I fly from Chicago to Paris. Paris to Yaoundé. Then I go to Kribi. Then I got to La Mare Pogué. Then I also try a new place in Cameroon: Duala or Bertoua or Mokolo or Bafoussam. I show your picture. I talk to as many people as I can. And I know that eventually – if I just don’t give up – that I will either find out how you died. Or I will find you.

**Samuel J:** You’ve been coming here?

**Samuel K:** Every year for the last seven years.
In this new ending, it is Samuel K.’s fortitude and love for his older brother that reunites them after seven years. The same person who said, “We are not really brothers” is the one who tirelessly searches for, and eventually finds, his brother. Mat felt this ending emphasized the love that Samuel K. has for Samuel J., despite the hurtful claim he made seven years before. In the older draft Samuel J. shows up on Samuel K.’s doorstep out of the blue, but in this newer draft their reunion is the result of years of effort on Samuel K.’s part. Mat felt this change deepened the brother’s relationship and commitment to each other, particularly given Samuel K. flies halfway around the world every year for seven years, to seek out Samuel J.

**?’S FOR THE CLASSROOM**

How do you feel the new ending affects the overall message of the play?

**From the Playwright:** In the first production of *Samuel J. and K.*, the first scene in Act Two took place in the living room of the brothers’ house in Naperville. I always felt like it was the weakest scene in the play because it felt so familiar. I like having scenes on the basketball court in Naperville and in the village in Cameroon because those are unusual settings for a play. Setting the top of Act Two in Cameroon changes two key things -- it makes every scene in the play set in places we’re not used to seeing plays set, and it makes Samuel J.’s decision to stay in Cameroon a much more absolute choice -- which makes the conflict between J. and K. even stronger.

**A SCRIPT STILL IN PROCESS**

“Right now, I feel very good about Act One, fairly good about Scene 3 and like there will be some finessing to do in Scene 4. However, I think this is probably a pretty good draft for us to enter rehearsals with on January 25.”

Mat Smart, in an email sent to Steppenwolf on December 22nd, 2010

Even though the workshop is over, Mat is still in the process of changing, molding, tweaking and rewriting parts of *Samuel J. and K.* Mat has a story to tell, and he wants to tell it in the most effective way possible. So when he enters the rehearsal room with the actors, director and dramaturg, new changes will undoubtedly be made and new scenes might even be written in. New play development is an exciting process, and we hope you now have a better understanding of what it’s all about.
Polly: Mat, it’s really good to have you here. I’m super excited that your play is going to be the second production of our Steppenwolf for Young Adults season. I’ll just start with a simple question: What made you decide to become a playwright?

Mat: Well, there were two really formative experiences and they both happened during high school. I grew up in Naperville, where the play is set, and during high school I did a production of King Arthur. The director really got us all on the same page and it was a kind of collaborative experience I’d never had before. I also went to a Steppenwolf for Young Adults production of The Crucible, and I don’t know what year that was, but it was really the most powerful piece of art I’d ever experienced. I thought if I could just be part of that—then that’s what I want to do. So it’s really trippy to be coming back. I never would have thought, as a kid sitting in that audience, that I would later write a play that other kids would come and see. It’s a cool thing.

P: I love that story. Did you study theatre in undergrad and in graduate school?

M: At that point I actually thought I wanted to be an actor. And then during my first year of college, three girls from my high school were killed by a drunk driver. It was the first time I knew anyone my age who had died. The only way I could make sense of it, because it was such a senseless, horrible thing that happened, was to write a play about it. I now find the plays that really speak to me are the ones that ask questions I can’t otherwise get past.

P: That’s such a great way to think about the reason we create art, right? To tell stories, to help us illuminate the parts of our lives that don’t make sense. Can you just talk a little bit about where you got the idea for Samuel J. and K.?

M: The play was inspired by two things: me growing up in Naperville and then later taking a trip to Cameroon. One night I stayed out in a Cameroonian village and just had an experience like none other I’d had in my life. And so for me, the play is a collision of those two lives. How can you feel so connected to a foreign place, when you’ve just arrived? And then other times you feel like a foreigner in your own hometown. The play asks questions like that. What is home? What is family?

P: So, how do you describe home now? Do you say you’re from Naperville? Where does home land for you?

M: You know, there are people from the suburbs who say they’re from Chicago. Then you ask them, “Oh, where in Chicago?” and they’re like, “Aurora.” But I’m proud of where I’m from. I had a great time growing up there, but there’s still a lot to complain about. I suppose that’s true of anywhere. But I do feel at home in Naperville—my mom still lives there, I still go there all the time, and it feels good to drive by the hospital I was born in. It’s actually right down the road from the cemetery I hope to be buried in.

P: How did you decide to travel to Cameroon?

M: I took a World Literature class in college that ended up being all about African literature. My professor was just a great teacher and had a lot of experience living in Africa. He actually went to Cameroon right after I graduated and offered to be my host if I traveled there. So I was granted a lot of access to the country, because he’d been in Cameroon for almost a year.
How can you feel so connected to a foreign place, when you’ve just arrived?

And then other times you feel like a foreigner in your own hometown. The play asks questions like that. What is home? What is family?

P: I know you’re a huge sports fan. Can you talk a little about how that influences your writing?

M: One thing I love about sports is that you never know what’s going to happen. You know, you can have a home game, and the home team is supposed to win, but they get steamrolled. I think it’s exciting to try to take some of that and bring it into the theatre.

P: And your play really uses basketball as part of the action. Can you talk about the theatricality of basketball on stage?

M: You know I initially wrote the basketball scenes offstage, because I didn’t think any theatre would want basketball onstage. But I just think it’s important that the game is really happening in front of the audience. I hope the audience will be excited to see that, because it’s not something you see very often. It’s a real game happening up there, not a metaphorical one. Of course there are places in the script where the actors are supposed to make the basket, and if they don’t—well, we have contingency plans.

P: So, just a final question, what’s up next for you? Do you have any plays coming up or projects you are working on?

M: There is actually a painter who has commissioned me to write a play inspired by his paintings. It’s kind of an unusual project that I am really excited about.

P: Mat thanks so much for sitting down with me and taking about your play. I’m really excited to see it.

M: Thanks for having me.
Viviani: Hi Ron, thanks for talking with me about *Samuel J. and K*. My first question is, what drew you to direct this production?

Ron: Well, they offered it to me. Just kidding. For me, I like going back to young audiences. So really, that is what initially appealed to me more than the play itself. Then I met Mat, and I saw how passionate he was. And when I talked to him I told him that I have an older brother, and we are somewhat estranged. And for me, that was the pull-in, because it made me think about my relationship with my own brother. Even though neither of us are of a different race or adopted, the relationship in the play seemed very close to me. When I look for something to direct, I look for a play that I can grasp onto. And this play did that for me. In fact, it made me call my brother.

V: That’s really amazing.

R: Also, theatre changed my life as a youth. I was pretty wild during high school. I say wild because it was a through neighborhood and there was a lot of stuff going on, and then a play came though and really affected me. I was in the seventh grade, and I never forgot it. I started as a twelve year old doing this. I have been directing since I was fourteen in a kind of program like you guys are in. So, all of those things really drew me to the play.
The best part about working with two actors is that it’s relatively simple. When you are directing a show with ten, eleven, twelve people, you have to break it down. It is a whole different process. With two people you can have sessions with one, sessions with the other. It is more focused. This is a play about relationships, so it helps to have just two people.

V: You talked about working with Mat, how closely did you work together during the casting and workshop process?

R: You know, we sat there together and we looked at everybody, along with Erica Daniels the casting director here. And then we just talked about it. As a director, sometimes you don’t have the writer there. So for me, when I do have the writer with me, I am very much into how the writer feels because the play is his vision and I’d like to bring that to fruition. Also, basketball was a big part of the audition process. We had to have someone who could play. Basically, you could be a great actor, but if you had no game you weren’t going to hang.

V: So, that was a really important part?

R: Very much so. We had everyone play basketball during the audition.

V: And what is the best part about working with just two actors?

R: The best part about working with two actors is that it’s relatively simple. When you are directing a show with ten, eleven, twelve people, you have to break it down. It is a whole different process. With two people you can have sessions with one, sessions with the other. It is more focused. This is a play about relationships, so it helps to have just two people.

V: In the script it says that Samuel J. and Samuel K. are raised by a single mother. How do you think that affects the family dynamic?

R: Mat and I talked about that, because I really want the mother to be a more prominent part of the play, even though she is not actually on stage. It’s a big important thing, what she goes through. And it makes the play deal with a lot more than just the two people on stage. A lot of times plays with only two characters are not just about those two people - in reality, there are a lot of other characters involved. I do want to deal with the fact that Samuel K. lives in Naperville and he is a black guy with a white mom. We will definitely deal with those issues in rehearsal. Not the things that are spoken, but things that are not spoken, the things he is feeling. I don’t know a lot about Naperville, but I am gonna check it out. Mat is going to take me there and we’re going to drive around.

V: In the climactic scene, Samuel K. tells Samuel J., “We are not even brothers.” Why do you think he does that?

R: It is hard to say. In a nutshell I can tell you that he is going through a lot of issues within himself, and I think anybody who hasn’t been adopted can’t really understand what exactly he is going through. He also has a lot of guilt about what is happening with him and Samuel J.’s girlfriend. There is just a lot of pressure for him to deal with his life. And he has always tried to act like it doesn’t matter that he was raised in Naperville, that he doesn’t care about Cameroon and where he came from. But in reality, he is struggling. There is a mental battle going on within him.
It made me think about my relationship with my own brother. Even though neither of us are of a different race or adopted, the relationship in the play seemed very close to me. When I look for something to direct, I look for a play that I can grasp onto. And this play did that for me. In fact, it made me call my brother.

V: How do you hope the audience will react to this play?

R: I hope that for one thing there is conversation when the audience leaves the theatre. A lot of times people go to the theatre and afterwards they are talking about where they want to go eat. I like plays that make people talk about what just happened. I am also hoping that this play does for the audience what it did for me. It made me think about my own family and my relationship with my brother. Maybe I will go home and hug my brother or hug my mother after the show; maybe the audience will do the same. And I also hope that the play makes people want to learn more about Cameroon. It made me go to the library and get some books about Cameroon to see what it is like. In America, we often have such an ignorant view of Africa.

V: What do you think of language in the play? For me, it was really relatable. Like the references to the iPhone 4G.

R: Well, those are references that we had to talk out in the workshop, because some of the lingo I wasn’t even familiar with. Mat obviously is, and Sam and Cliff might be, but I think the language is especially relevant for the audience. You guys know this stuff. I didn’t even know what OMG was. So they had to tell me things like that. I just got a smart phone and I am still trying to figure it out.

V: Ha. Well you can always ask the Young Adult Council for help.

R: You know, even though the play starts when the characters are 23 and 29, for me the play begins when Samuel K. is adopted as a three year old. When we are in rehearsal we will really deal with what went on before he was 23. How did he feel growing up in Naperville being a young African? He wasn’t even African American yet, he was African. Given Mat is from Naperville he will definitely have insight into that. But aside from all that, I do think the language is cool. It’s down, it’s hip.

V: Definitely. Well thanks for talking to me.

R: No problem at all.
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SEX WITH STRANGERS BY LAURA EASON
Saturday, March 26th at 3:00pm

HOT L BALTIMORE BY LANDFORD WILSON
Saturday, April 30th at 7:30pm*

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Young Adult Council applications are due May 10th
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