



# King James

## Enrichment Guide

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Royal Manitoba Theatre Centre is proud to call Manitoba home. Royal MTC is located in Winnipeg on Treaty 1, the traditional territory of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Anishinew, and Dakota people, and the National Homeland of the Red River Métis. We are thankful for the benefits sharing this land has afforded us, acknowledge the responsibilities of the Treaties, and embrace the opportunity to partner with Indigenous communities in the spirit of reconciliation and collaboration.

## The Role of the Audience

Theatre needs its audience! We are happy to have you here. Every staff person, actor, and crew member backstage plays an important part in your experience, and you also have a role in the experience of cast, crew and the people around you.

**Arrive Early:** Please make sure you give yourself enough time to find your seat before the performance starts. Latecomers may not be admitted to a performance. We ask schools and other groups to arrive at least 20-30 minutes before the show.

**Cell Phones and Other Electronic Devices:** Please **turn off** your cell phone/mp3 player /gaming system/camera/smart watch. Texting, surfing, and gaming during performances is very distracting for the performers and other audience members. Using cameras and recording devices during a performance is **never** allowed.

**Talking During the Performance:** Even when you whisper, you can be heard by performers and people around you. Unless it is a relaxed performance, disruptive patrons will be removed from the theatre. Please wait until after the performance to share your words with others.

**Food/Drinks:** Food and outside drinks are not allowed in the theatre. When there is an intermission, snacks and drinks may be available for purchase. There is complimentary water in the lobby.

**Dress:** There is no dress code at the Royal MTC, but we respectfully ask you not to wear hats in the theatre. We strive to be a scent-free environment and thank all patrons for their cooperation.

**Leaving During the Performance:** If you leave the theatre during a performance, you will be readmitted at the discretion of Front of House staff. If readmitted, you may be placed in an empty seat at the back of the auditorium instead of your original seat.

**Being Asked to Leave:** The theatre staff has, and will exercise, the right to ask any member of the audience to leave if that person is being inappropriate or disruptive including (but not limited to): talking, using devices that produce light or sound, and deliberately interfering with an actor or the performance (tripping, throwing items on or near the stage, etc.).

**Talkbacks:** A short question and answer period with the actors takes place after student matinees, first Tuesday evening shows, and some public matinees. While watching the show, make a mental note of questions to ask the actors about the production or life in the theatre. Our artists deserve to be treated with respect! It's okay to have a negative opinion, but this is your chance to ask questions and understand the performance or process, not to criticize. If you have a concern, see the house manager after the show and they will make sure your feedback gets to the appropriate Royal MTC staff.

**Enjoy the show:** Laugh, cry, gasp – responding to the performance is part of the nature of theatre! As you get involved in the story, try to balance your reactions with respecting the people around you. The curtain call is part of the performance too – it gives you a chance to thank all the artists for their hard work with applause, and for them to thank you for your attention. We all appreciate when you stay at your seat and join in the applause!

## Playwright Biography

**Rajiv Joseph** is a celebrated American playwright and a member of the Steppenwolf Theatre. Born in Cleveland in 1974, he received his undergraduate degree in creative writing from Miami University, and got his Master of Fine Arts in playwrighting from the Tisch School of the Arts at NYU.

Mr. Joseph has won two Obie Awards for Best New American Play for his plays, *Guards at the Taj* and *Describe the Night*, and was a Pulitzer Prize finalist for Drama for his play, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, which studied the War on Iraq through the tiger's eyes. Other plays include *Archduke*, *Gruesome Playground Injuries*, and *The North Pool and Mr. Wolf*.

Mr. Joseph also writes for television and film. Credits include the screenplay for the movie *Draft Day*, and writing credits on both *Nurse Jackie* and *Russian Doll*.

## Plot Summary

A friendship between two young men, brought together by season basketball tickets, goes through its ups and downs as LeBron James' career ebbs and flows over 12 years.

## Content Overview

Strong language, microaggression, passing mention of a dog hit by a car. The show could be appropriate for those younger than 15 but it may not resonate with younger teens.

## Synopsis

**This section contains spoilers.**

*King James* is divided into 4 quarters, like a basketball game. Each quarter takes place in a different year, at a different stage of Matt and Shawn's relationship.

### **First Quarter, February 2004: Rookie of the Year**

Matt and Shawn meet. Shawn is a long time Cavs fan who has never seen a game in person, and Matt has gone to game with his dad using their season tickets his whole life. Matt has gotten into some poor investments and his dad, no longer able to attend, has said rather than bail him out, he can sell the rest of their season. Matt plays hardball, trying to get Shawn to both prove he is worthy of the tickets, but also trying to get the most money he can out of Shawn. He accuses Shawn of only becoming a fan because the Rookie, LeBron James, is predicted to be the next big star. Shawn slowly convinces Matt that he is not a "bandwagon fan," but cannot afford the price Matt is asking. They talk about their childhoods, and Shawn reveals he has published a short story about being alone. Later in the scene, Matt gets a phone call and his other buyer

backs out, so he reluctantly decides to take Shawn's offer. As the scene ends, it is revealed that Shawn doesn't have anyone to go with.

### **Second Quarter, July 2010; 6 1/2 years later: The Decision**

Matt and Shawn have been attending the games together for the last six and a half years, and are now best friends. We meet them the day LeBron James announces that he is moving to join the Miami Heat. Shawn is devastated and feels disrespected. Matt is angry but Shawn is ready to give up sports. He threatens to burn his LeBron jersey and doesn't want to get tickets the following season. Matt tries to encourage him, but Shawn reveals there is a second reason he doesn't want tickets, he is moving to New York to take a graduate program for television writing. It is revealed that Shawn has a really close relationship with Matt's parents and they have known about this for a while, which hurts Matt's feelings. Shawn tries to encourage Matt to focus on his plans for a new business, but between LeBron and Shawn, Matt pontificates on the idea that Cleveland is a place you move away from to be successful. The scene ends with Matt feeling incredibly sad and alone.

### **Third Quarter, July 2014, 4 years later: Return of the King**

Shawn is working at Matt's parents shop in a cheesy uniform. Matt comes in and has a laugh at him. Matt has finished grad school but has not had any success breaking into a writing room yet. Matt's new establishment seems lucrative. He is paying for Shawn to fly out to LA to take meetings that could lead to writing work. He offers to get tickets for them to a Tribe game, but the tickets cost \$400, and Shawn can't afford them. They have found out that LeBron is coming back to Cleveland and this sparks a huge argument. Shawn is excited he is back, but Matt begins to make increasingly disparaging comments questioning Shawn about his excitement and talking down about LeBron, ending with a comment that LeBron should have "known his place". Shawn wants to know what Matt means by this, and Matt insists it was a surface level comment, but it becomes clear that he knows that it is a racially charged statement and was offensive. Shawn asserts that Matt feels the same about him, and enjoys being the one with financial success, that it makes him feel good when Shawn borrows money for his flight, etc. The scene ends with Shawn challenging Matt to walk away think about the conversation further, which Matt refuses. Shawn calls out Matt for always talking about what's wrong with America, but Matt's inability to reflect on this conversation is what's really wrong. Matt doesn't get it, and Shawn refuses to explain it.

### **Fourth Quarter, June 2016, 2 years later: The Parade**

Matt is now the one working at his parents store, which is being liquidated. Shawn arrives and we see a reversal of the Third Quarter. Shawn is working in LA on a show and Matt's business has closed so he's helping his mom close down the shop. Matt watches Shawn's show and points out the weirdness of Shawn working on it. Shawn

eventually admits it is a problematic show for a bunch of reasons, and he got in trouble for pointing them out. The parade for the Cavs series win is happening downtown but Matt refuses to admit he watched the game. Shawn reveals he attended the game alone, and would accidentally make comments to Matt before realizing he wasn't there. They fight about whether LeBron has stolen Jordan's place as the greatest of all time. Shawn tries to get Matt to come to the parade but Matt's waiting for his girlfriend to call him and break up with him. They decide to play a game to decide whether or not they go to the parade, and the show ends.

## Contextual Background

### LeBron James

The 6'9" tall "King James" is the NBA's all-time leading scorer and four-time NBA champion as well as four-time NBA finals MVP who has appeared in 1492 NBA games, as well as a Team USA Olympic Gold Medallist. James currently plays for the LA Lakers, and his career has also included the Cleveland Cavaliers and Miami Heat. As a high school student in Akron Ohio, he led his school to three state championships and appeared on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* in his grade 11 year. He contemplated going pro at that point, but opted to finish his schooling instead. In 2003, he was named the National High School Player of the Year and then selected by the Cleveland Cavaliers with the first overall selection of the NBA draft; he was then named Rookie of the Year that season. At 20 years old he was the youngest player to get this award, and also was the first Cavalier to do so. Even before playing professionally, he had signed an unprecedented \$90 million endorsement with Nike.

James married his high school sweetheart in 2013, and they have three children. Son LeBron Jr or "Bronny" was signed to the Lakers in 2024, so father and son play on the team together. James has been active in Hollywood and owns multiple production companies. He is also involved in philanthropic work: in 2004, he and his mother Gloria founded the LeBron James Family Foundation which assists children and single-parent families in need.

### Cleveland Heights

Cleveland Heights was built around a quarry established in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. With the development of the streetcar in the 1890s, suburbs became more practical and the population grew quickly. Mostly due to restrictive covenants (contracts limiting what could be done with property), the Black population in Cleveland Heights was less than 1% in 1960. Black Clevelanders moving into the area in the 1960s and led to violence and pushback from some white citizens, with the population still only at 2% Black. In later decades, the population grew more diverse. Led by members of St. Ann Church, residents formed the Heights Community Congress to achieve a racially integrated community, and Heights Citizens for Human Rights also formed to protest violence

against Black citizens. Cleveland Heights City Council passed fair housing legislation and established a city housing service in 1976. The 2020 census revealed that the population was 46% White, 41% African American, 5% Asian American, 5% two or more races, 3% Latinx, and 0.16 “Native American and Alaskan Native”. Cleveland Heights today prides itself on its racial, religious and economic diversity (Morton.)

In 2020 41% of the population of Cleveland Heights was estimated to have a bachelor’s degree or higher. 18% of the population was living below the poverty line. This is slightly lower than the 19% of ten years previous.

**SPOILERS: #BlackLivesMatter and the idea of LeBron “knowing his place”**

The organization Black Lives Matter was founded in 2013, following the murder of 17-year old Trayvon Martin and the acquittal of his murderer, George Zimmerin, shining a spotlight about the continued anti-black racism that persists in the United States, Canada and the world. This is an important component in terms of the context of the play, as the third quarter fight, during which Shawn calls out Matt for his comments, would have taken place as many black folks across the United States and Canada were organizing and engaging in active demonstrations and awareness campaigns around the deaths that had continued (and are continuing) to happen, including 18-year-old Michael Brown and 43-year-old Eric Garner who were murdered by police in the summer of 2014.

Matt’s comment in the Third Quarter of the play takes place within both the BLM movement, as well as the 2nd term of America’s first Black President. While Shawn is devastated by LeBron’s move to Miami in 2010, he is more than ready to forgive and forget, and rejoices at the return of “the prodigal son”. Matt, who had been adamant that his move was predictable and justified, is incensed that LeBron thinks he can come back when it suits him, comparing him to a woman who’s cheated and then comes back to the man she’s cheated on. When Shawn accuses him of making up his own rules, Matt counters - “They’re basic notions of decency [...] LeBron lacks class [...] he lacked it then, he lacks it now. He should have had more respect, and he should have known his place.”

While the idea has been formally and academically explored more recently (please see sources for a few access points to the work of Dr. Koritha Mitchell), the act of retaliation against successful black folks through personal and systemic means is a longstanding practice. In Matt’s off handed comment, he is signalling that LeBron was gifted this opportunity by Cleveland, thought he deserved better and moved up to a higher opportunity, which was above his station. Dr. Mitchell asserts that when a white man is successful, he is almost universally congratulated, and it is accepted that he deserved that success, but that about half the time, a black person who gains success will receive

suspicion, derision or hostility. She asserts that this is because our society, as a whole, continues to perpetuate white supremacy through its systems, stories and institutions. Examples of this phenomenon are found in such historical events as the Black Wall Street Massacre of 1921. Dr. Koritha also points to more recent occurrences such as new highways being built through wealthy black neighbourhoods. Does Donald Trump get elected without President Obama being elected the first Black President, or is this America attempting to put things back in their proper place?

## Glossary and Mentions

**Baskin Robbins** – an ice cream chain store.

**Bandwagon Fan** – Someone who only likes a team when they are doing well. This is especially derisive towards folks who cheer for their home team only when they are doing well.

**Bodhisattva** – a Buddhist who is on the path to awakening, becoming a buddha, or who is particularly exceptional. Depending on which school is being followed there are variations on how one takes this path and how exclusive it is.

**Foul** – a call in basket ball that means someone has interfered with a player in a way that they are not supposed to. These can be separate by defensive fouls (a foul made when playing defence) and offensive fouls (a foul made by someone playing offence). The action either puts another player at physical risk, or interferes in someone's attempt at shooting in an illegal way (such as grabbing their arm). A foul can result in the other team being given control of the ball, or up to two free shots being awarded to the player who was fouled.

**Implicational** – evidence that works to logically tie ideas or events together.

**Jim Gray** – the Emmy Award winning sportscaster who interviewed LeBron James as he announced he was moving to Miami in 2010.

**Nighttown** – a longstanding jazz nightclub, opened in 1966. It was operational until August 2024, when it had to shut down.

**Point Guard** – position in basketball similar to a football quarterback, who is a strong player but can read the court and make calls on plays for the team as the game progresses.

**Tchotchkes** – knick-knacks or small ornamental trinkets. Derived from the Yiddish - tshatshke after the (now obsolete) Polish czaczko (Dictionary.com).

**Zydrunas Ilgauskas** – Lithuanian-American Basketball player who played for Cleveland from 1997-2010.

## Questions to consider or discuss

### Pre-Show

1. What are you a fan of? How has your fandom impacted your life?
2. Do you have any activities or routines from your childhood that would be difficult to give up? What are they, and what makes them special?
3. Have you ever been called out for making a comment you didn't realize was insensitive to an identity group or demographic you are not a member of? How did that make you feel? Have you ever been on the receiving end of an insensitive comment? How did you react? (Self reflection - don't force this into a public discussion as it is sensitive!)
4. What does success look like to you?
5. Think of your closest friend. Are there topics you avoid? Do you feel comfortable disagreeing with your friends? Why or why not?
6. How difficult do you find it to admit a mistake?

### Post-Show

#### Fandom

- *King James* follows two young adults who come to be fast friends through their mutual love of the Cleveland Cavaliers. They have very different origin stories - Matt has had season tickets and has attended games with his dad since he was little. Shawn has never been to a game in person - the tickets were too expensive, and although he won a pair once, his dad had to work late and couldn't go.
- Think of something you are a fan of. What does someone need to demonstrate to you that they are a True Fan?
- The idea of Sports as a type of religion is tossed around in the play. When Shawn is ranting about LeBron's decision to go to Miami, he makes the comparison and says of Jesus and LeBron: "Both are vengeful deities who promise salvation *IF*. *If* you do this. *If* you don't do that. *If* you say your prayers. *If* you give him a team. And every fan is just some fundamental extremist, funneling their devotion down an endless drain. "Fan" is short for "fanatic:" And I don't like being one. "
- Consider the comparison. Would Shawn and Matt's lives be different if they weren't Cavs fans?
- Shawn starts the show with the perspective that no one will ever be as good as Jordan, Matt insisting that LeBron will surpass him. At the end, Matt insists Jordan is still the best, while Shawn believes he has witnessed the passing of the torch. What is the significance of their change in perspective?



## Deep Friendship

- Shawn's published story "the Mouse" is about a little boy who befriends a mouse after his sister goes away to college. When Matt tries to say it's about loneliness, Shawn quickly suggests that it's not, it's about aloneness.
- How do you think the themes of loneliness versus aloneness are addressed in the subsequent scenes. When Shawn goes to Grad school, does Matt end up lonely, or alone? When Shawn goes to LA? Would Matt ever admit to being lonely?
- Matt and Shawn's fight in the Third Quarter is never resolved. Why does Matt never apologize to Shawn? Can Matt's attempts to reach out be considered an apology?
- Do you think Matt and Shawn's friendship are restored by the end of the play? Will they now keep in touch? Why or why not?
- Shawn as a prodigal son - when Shawn leaves for grad school Matt is sad but happy for him, in the same way he is sad but fine with LeBron's move. When Shawn is working at Matt's family's store, Matt shows the same disrespect for Shawn as he does for LeBron's return. Although they both have problems with Shawn's show, it seems that Shawn is deemed successful and has gained back his respect from Matt in the ending.
- While Matt hasn't forgiven LeBron, who is still playing for the Cavs, he seems to have forgiven Shawn, who has moved on permanently. Is it significant that it mirrors his sentiment in the Third Quarter Argument - LeBron can leave, but he can't come crawling back again? Has Matt grown?

## America and the Problem With It

- In each Quarter the characters talk about the Problem with America, Matt usually insisting at some point that the problem with America is people's fickle nature. He believes that folks choosing whether or not to follow a sports team based on how well they are doing or who they have playing demonstrates a lack of morals and constancy. He points out how strange it is that a basketball rookie from Akron has the power to influence the economy of Cleveland.

During the fight in the third quarter, Shawn suggests Matt's refusal to reflect on the racially charged comments he has made is what actually is the Problem with America. Meanwhile, book bans and legislation against the idea of "Critical Race Theory" have been attempting to make it harder to ensure citizens have the tools to speak and reflect on topics of race and racism.

Is it important to foster these reflections? In your opinion, if America had one problem, would this be it? Would it be the fickleness of hero worship?

## Age and Growing up

- The play takes place over the characters' young adulthood. How do they change as they mature from 21 to 33 years old? Do you think the decision to highlight these years specifically is significant to the story?

## Shawn's writers' room

- When we consider the timing of the play, which spans Obama's election and reelection, ending as Trump is the official candidate for the Republican Party, as well as the inaugural years of the BLM movement, and that it is written in the years following the murder of Sandra Bland, George Floyd and ensuing protests and actions, what does it mean to shade Shawn's breakthrough television job with the white saviour cop, and him being the only black person in the room? How does this aspect of his success impact Shawn and Matt's potential reconciliation?

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### **Enrichment Guide Contributor Biography**

Tala Gammon is an English and Drama Teacher at St. John's High School. She has taught in the Winnipeg School Division 17 years. She lives in North Winnipeg with her sillywonderful family and her Husky-who-is-a-bad-dog. She has B.A. with Honours in Theatre: performance and a B.Ed from University of Winnipeg, is a member of the Manitoba Association of Playwrights, and is the human behind addpunctuation.ca, created to spin yarns literally and figuratively, among other things. Her favourite show at Royal MTC last year was *Clue*.