

THE
BELGRADE
THEATRE
COVENTRY

A Belgrade Theatre production
In association with tiata fahodzi

SWIM, AUNTY, SWIM!

Self-Care Toolkit for Audiences

About this resource:

This toolkit is designed to support audiences engaging with the Belgrade Theatre's production of **Swim, Aunty, Swim!** particularly those who might be affected by its themes or content.

The resource contains information about the show that may be useful before you see it, so that you know what to expect and where to find support should you need it.

If you require a copy of this pack in large print or on different colour paper, please contact Communityadmin@belgrade.co.uk

For more information about the Belgrade's work please visit www.belgrade.co.uk

Contents

- About Swim, Aunty, Swim! 3
- Content Advisories 3
- Tips for Looking After Yourself 4
- Synopsis of the Play 5
- Signposting 13
- Opportunities for reflection & engagement 15

About the show:

DAT REN WE BIT BITA-LIF SOTE I BITA, NA-IN BIT SHUGA KEN SOTE I SWIT – Krio Proverb. Translation: *The same rain that beats bitter-leaf until its bitter, beats sugar cane until it's sweet.*

Fatu is in search of a new life and a fresh start. Leaving London behind, she makes her way to Coventry. There she forms a friendship with fellow members of her new church, Aunty Blessing and Aunty Ama – a fiery, entertaining and sharp-witted duo of West African women in their prime, navigating changes and transitions in their own lives.

At Ama's whim, the three of them embark on a watery challenge.

What begins as light-hearted fun and a distraction from the mundane routine of life and church, becomes a ritual of healing and rebirth, after a season of grieving.

Set across Lagos, Accra, Freetown, London, Birmingham, and Coventry, **Swim, Aunty, Swim!** is written by Siana Bangura and directed by Madeleine Kludje.

Content Advisories:

Swim, Aunty, Swim! contains reference to:

- domestic abuse
- a death in custody
- loss of a child
- miscarriage
- depiction of near drowning
- grief throughout.

You can find a detailed outline of the story in this pack, which will help you to know what to expect.

Tips for looking after yourself:

- **Watch the show with others:** It may help to watch with others who know you well, particularly those who are aware of any connections you may have to the themes of the show. If this isn't possible, try to let a family member or friend know in advance so that they'll be able to support you should you need someone to talk to afterwards.
- **Read the synopsis of the story:** If you're concerned that you may be affected by, or uncomfortable with, some of the themes and content of the show it may help you to prepare yourself by reading a synopsis of the story. You can find a detailed, scene-by-scene, outline on p.5 of this pack.
- **Take a break:** Remember that you're in control. If you need to step away, you can take a break at any time. Our Front of House team are on hand if you want to leave.
- **Make use of resources:** There are a number of tools, activities and resources available for audiences to engage with alongside the show, which are designed to support creative response and reflection around your engagement with the play and its themes. Further details of these can be found on the last page of this pack.
- **Remember your breathing:** Regulating your breathing is a simple and effective way to help you feel calm. Try taking deep breaths in and out, breathing in through your nose for four seconds and out through your mouth for four seconds.
- **Ground yourself:** If you feel anxious or uncomfortable at any point during or after the show, you can help to ground yourself by focusing on your senses. Acknowledge 5 things you can see around you, 4 things you can hear, 3 things you can touch (your clothing, the seat you're sitting in etc), 2 things you can smell, and 1 thing you can taste.

Synopsis

This synopsis is written for anyone who would like to have a greater understanding of the sensitive content prior to seeing the show, therefore please be aware that if you read on there will be significant spoilers. Please note that text in inverted commas is taken directly from the play.

Act 1: Prologue

A dreamlike sequence in which we are at the dock of open water. Three women, Fatu, Blessing and Ama, are swimming towards something, at different speeds and at different distances. They pause in the water in their respective positions to recite the words of a poem, 'The Waves'.

Scene 1

Ama and Blessing are standing at the edge of a swimming pool ahead of their lesson. Ama is trying to persuade Blessing to get into the water, without success. They're waiting for their friend Fatu, who Ama doubts will come.

Their swimming instructor, Danny, arrives. He greets them, stumbling over Blessing's surname. Blessing reveals that she didn't want to come to the class, she was tricked into attending by Ama. Danny says that it would be nice to get Blessing in the water 'this time'.

Ama tells Blessing to 'trust the water', and that she needs to do something for herself. She knows that January is a difficult time for Blessing and refers to the passing of an anniversary.

The lesson begins. Blessing accuses Ama of trying to impress the much younger Danny. Ama tells Blessing to live a little.

Scene 2

Sunday morning at church. Fatu and Blessing are in the congregation. Ama arrives. She tries to catch Fatu's attention, wanting to know why she didn't show up for the swimming lesson earlier in the week – this is not the first lesson she's missed.

Ama doubts Fatu's claim that she was busy. Fatu tells Ama that she doesn't want to swim.

Ama reminds Fatu that women of their age need to look after themselves. Fatu tells her that she doesn't want to parade around in a bikini. Blessing reassures her that if that's the only concern she can dress modestly.

Ama has already told Danny that Fatu will be joining.

Blessing reveals to Fatu that she didn't want to get into the water. Ama adds that's because she feared Mami Wata would grab her legs.

Ama encourages Fatu to meet them later at the pool. Fatu says that she'll think about it.

Scene 3

Ama and Blessing are back at the swimming pool. They discuss whether Fatu will make an appearance. Blessing accuses Ama of being too insensitive, cautioning that Fatu needs time. Ama says that 'softly, softly' isn't the way to help Fatu.

Danny arrives. He asks whether Fatu will be joining them. Blessing tells him that she's running late.

Danny wonders whether Ama has mentioned the upcoming relay race, which will be taking place in open water. Ama wants to know if Blessing can also take part – receiving a resounding 'no' from Blessing.

Blessing heads to another area of the pool, leaving Danny and Ama alone. Ama promises that Blessing will be ready in time for the race in August. Danny informs her that three people are needed in each relay team in the race. Ama asks him to sign herself, Blessing and Fatu up.

Fatu arrives, fully clothed. She is introduced to Danny who asks if she has any prior swimming experience. Fatu reveals that she used to swim along time ago with her son.

Danny tells Fatu about the class – promising to bring extra swimming aids next week. Fatu says she isn't sure, she's busy in the evenings sometimes, but will come when she can.

Fatu leaves causing Ama to wonder why she rushed off. Blessing tells Ama 'at least she came this time – small, small, small, small'.

The lesson resumes. Danny encourages Blessing to try floating without a swimming aid. Blessing is nervous, but Danny encourages her to trust him – he says he knows she can do it.

Blessing asks Danny if he's been to university. He confesses that he's not sure if it's for him and that he doesn't really know what he wants to do yet. He reveals that he trained to be a police officer for a while, but decided it wasn't for him, and that his father, who is also in the police force, wanted him to follow in his footsteps.

Danny tells Blessing that he's interested in water therapy and saw an advert for a job in London. Blessing encourages him to follow his own advice and believe in himself.

Blessing floats in the water.

ACT 2: Scene 1

Blessing's Kitchen. Blessing is talking about her recent swimming lesson with Ama and Fatu – she can't believe that she was floating. Ama is proud of her.

Ama begins to talk about her children, who are growing up and leaving home. She tells Blessing and Fatu that she's considering joining dating apps – she wants to meet a gentleman. Blessing tells Ama that she'd find a good man at church if she behaved more piously, that gentle women attract gentlemen.

The friends talk about Blessing's children, who she describes as fiercely independent. They look at photographs of Blessing's family. A picture of 18-year-old Blessing falls out of the photo album, a reminder of her life as a model in Lagos.

Blessing shares a picture of her husband, Emmanuel, taken shortly before he was diagnosed with prostate cancer. She reveals that he later died, after stopping treatment and choosing to return home to 'pray and fast'. Ama tells Blessing that she should 'get back out there' as it's been five years since her husband passed away.

The conversation shifts: Ama asks Fatu when she plans to return to swimming lessons. Blessing admits that she was once terrified of water and now she's floating – she believes Danny can also help Fatu.

Ama wants to take part in the open water swimming race but Blessing doesn't. Ama tries to encourage Fatu, who reveals that she used to love swimming with her son – she once saved him from near drowning, after which they took regular lessons together. Things are not the same anymore.

Ama and Blessing encourage Fatu to consider returning to the pool – water heals.

Scene 2 (i)

It's 9pm. Fatu is at the pool, waiting for everyone to leave. Danny is tidying nearby. He asks Fatu how she is; he wasn't sure that she would return after last time.

Fatu says that she just wants to 'feel the pool', to be in the space. She sits by the water, suddenly having a flashback. She hears her son, Ishmail, calling for her and gets into the water to reach him.

Scene 2 (ii)

Time has passed. Back at the pool, Danny is helping Blessing. Ama and Fatu are swimming nearby. Danny tells Blessing that she's getting good at swimming, and that she won't need his help for much longer.

Danny tells the class that he has an announcement: the open water swim is now going to be a fundraiser for a local charity called WeSoKan Coventry. He's been told that the founder of the charity is from Nigeria and that the name is a play on the word for unity (in Yoruba). He says that it's a newly-formed charity, made up of people who have been affected by a death in custody, which causes Fatu to stop in the water.

Danny reminds the class to let him know if they want to take part. He announces that Fatu, Blessing and Ama are already signed up, which is a surprise to Fatu and Blessing – Ama has enrolled them without their knowledge.

Blessing accuses Ama of being selfish and wicked, and Fatu reminds Ama that they'd already said no to taking part. Ama insists that it's what they all need. She's been having dreams about them racing in the open water; they're swimming towards something.

Fatu insists that she won't be taking part, and says she wants her name taken off the list immediately. Ama argues that it's for a good cause, a cause founded by an African woman in Coventry, who's a mother, like them.

Fatu leaves. Blessing accuses Ama of pushing people past their limits and of never listening to anyone but herself; Ama called them all mothers and Fatu's son has died.

Ama warns that grief will swallow you whole if you don't fight against its tide. She was trying to help Fatu – 'woman to woman, and mother to mother'.

Scene 2 (iii)

At the pool, Ama is waiting for Fatu and Blessing to arrive. Blessing is uncharacteristically late. Danny asks Ama if he said something wrong last session – she looks downbeat. Ama reveals that Fatu and Blessing didn't know that they were signed up for the open water race.

Danny tells Ama that people have to say yes to things before being signed up. He suggests that Ama give Blessing a call, telling her that it's important to meet people where they're at.

Ama questions a 'softly, softly' approach, but Danny suggests maybe should try a different approach with her friends – she is a leader after all.

Ama tells Danny to keep their names on the list. She's going to call Blessing and sort out the situation.

Scene 3 (i)

Church. Ama is early and setting up. Blessing and Fatu arrive. They ignore Ama.

Ama apologises, and Fatu tells her that she doesn't want to hear another word about swimming.

Suddenly, a commotion – a pipe has burst in the church and the sprinklers go off. The friends are forced to leave. Outside, Ama asks if Fatu leaves nearby – could they stop by as they haven't visited yet? She tells Fatu that she has bought her a gift as a token.

Fatu agrees to welcome the friends to her home.

Scene 3 (ii)

Fatu's house. A large portrait of a smiling young man hangs on the wall – Fatu's son, Ishmail.

Ama asks Fatu to bring water. She and Blessing would like to pay respects to Ishmail. They pray, drinking the water before taking their seats.

Ama apologises again for signing Fatu and Blessing up to the open water race. She encourages Fatu to open her gift – a bracelet. She tells Fatu that in her culture the beads are for healing heavy hearts.

Ama tells the story of how she fell pregnant with her oldest child at the age of 18. She had to return to Accra, where completed her education. The father of her child returned after he graduated, and they continued their relationship. Ama reveals that he hit her, causing her to leave. She describes eventually meeting someone else and having twins, but says that the relationship went sour and she left.

Ama tells Fatu that she ended up being alone with her children and the subject of gossip. She had to learn to open up. She shares a Twi proverb, 'one hand is never enough to lift a heavy load', encouraging Fatu to share what's troubling her.

Fatu tells Ama and Blessing that she and her husband moved to Coventry three years ago, after their son Ishmail was killed. She had to identify her son's body, as her husband, Philip, couldn't do it.

Fatu reveals that it had taken a long time for the couple to conceive, and that she had several miscarriages before Ishmail was born.

Fatu tells Blessing and Ama that Ishmail was killed by the police, after intervening in 'trouble that was not his own'. He was in the wrong place at the wrong time. She tells them the story of his death was in the news for months, and that many assumed the worst of him, calling him a criminal. The officers who killed him were never convicted.

Fatu believes that she failed Ishmail - she couldn't fight for justice following his death. She was exhausted and wanted her son back.

Fatu reveals that she's started going out into the city to record the police encounters with young people - particularly young Black men - to gather evidence in case it's ever needed.

Ama suggests that a better way of coping might be to fundraise for WeSoKan through the open water race. Blessing tells Fatu that Danny's father is in the police, and that Danny himself had been an officer for a short while until he'd quit to become a swimming instructor. Ama wonders if this is the reason why he wants to support WeSoKan.

Blessing asks Fatu why she is fixated on the open water swim - they could just donate to the charity.

Ama compares the act of swimming to worship. She reminds them of her recurring dream about them out in the open water. Ama says they must listen to their ancestors, they're finding a way to speak to them.

Fatu says that she'll consider the open water swim.

Scene 4

The swimming pool. Blessing and Ama are warming up, Fatu is yet to arrive.

Danny asks how Blessing and Ama are feeling about the open water swim. Ama tells him that they're signed up and prepared, they're just awaiting Fatu's final word.

Danny tells Blessing that he's taken her advice about doing things even if you're scared; he's applied for internships to become an aquatic physiotherapist. He reflects on how far Blessing and Ama have come in their swimming lessons. He comments that he hasn't observed many African women at the pool - he hopes that isn't an offensive thing to say.

Ama reminds him of Mami Wata, a water deity. She tells him that some African people, like Blessing, are scared of swimming because of her. Ama offers to bring him some West African food after class, and asks if his mum cooks for him.

Danny tells Ama and Blessing that his mother died when he was eight, and that he doesn't remember much of her. He was raised by his grandmother.

Just as the lesson is coming to an end, Fatu arrives. She's decided that she will take part in the open water swim. Blessing says that she is both excited and terrified.

Act 3: Scene 1

The Open Water Swim Centre. Fatu, Blessing and Ama are standing at the dock, waiting to start the race. Danny offers words of encouragement to them.

Blessing's children and grandchild are standing in the crowd waiting to cheer the friends on.

The swimmers line up to start the relay. Ama goes first, swimming powerfully, followed by Blessing – who is delighted to complete her lap. Fatu is next; she takes a deep breath and swims, racing past other swimmers. She begins to stray from the circular route, swimming further into the distance as if swimming towards something.

Ama swims out to catch Fatu. She calls after her, shouting Fatu to come back.

Ama begins to tire. She stops, suddenly waving for help. Fatu turns in the water, she hears Ama's cries, which blur into Ishmail's. Fatu is thrown into a flashback, to Ishmail's cries for help. She is pulled back into the present by Danny, who is calling her name.

Fatu swims back to Ama to save her. Lifeguards pull Fatu and Ama from the water.

Scene 2

The Open Water Swim Centre. Fatu, Blessing and Ama are sitting by the dock covered in foil blankets for warmth. The crowds have gone. Only Danny remains. He asks Ama what happened to her in the water. She tells him that she became exhausted whilst trying to catch up with Ama, and then panicked.

Fatu apologises for not following the rules. She tells them that she felt free and at peace in the open water, something she's not felt for a long time. She reveals that she heard Ishmail's voice telling her to let him go. Fatu thanks Ama and Blessing for encouraging her back into the water.

Blessing thanks Danny for his teaching. She wonders if there's any news on his internship applications. Danny reveals that he's been offered an interview for the job in London. He tells Fatu that he's sorry for her loss, and that Ishmail was lucky to have her as his mum.

Fatu tells the group that she couldn't save Ishmail when he needed her most, on the day he was killed. Danny is surprised to learn that Ishmail was killed in police custody. His father is a police officer, but he wants to forge his own path.

Danny reveals that they raised £2,500 for WeSoKan Coventry, and that one of the founders had watched the race – a mother whose child had died a couple of years before in Coventry.

Ama reflects that the day has been a 'big wakeup call'.

Scene 3

A month later. The third anniversary of Ishmail's death. Fatu, Blessing and Ama are at his graveside.

Ama has recently returned from a solo trip, and we learn that Danny got the internship in London.

Fatu tells her friends that Ishmail died a few days before her birthday, and that September will never be the same again.

Blessing describes this as a place of hope. That Ishmail has brought Fatu to them.

Ama searches for hymn books and notices that Blessing's wedding ring is missing. Blessing reveals that she has a dinner date the following week. She searches the hymn book for her favourite hymn, it's the one they sang at her husband's funeral, 'Abide With Me'.

Blessing, Ama and Fatu begin to sing.

The End.

Signposting

If you have been affected by any of the themes of **Swim, Aunty, Swim!** the following organisations can offer expert advice and support.

This information is correct as of May 2024.

Support Organisations for Grief & Bereavement:

[Compassionate Communities](#) -

[Exploring Your Grief: A Word About Support from Compassionate Communities](#)

The production could stir up emotions or past experiences for you in the days or weeks ahead, such that you want to take further actions for your emotional wellbeing. If that happens, Compassionate Communities can offer you onward assistance.

We hold our own support groups for bereavement, and periodic conversation cafes. We offer a Listening Hour service where you can just have a private, 1:1 conversation to think things through with a friendly volunteer. If our own services aren't right for you, we will do our best to point you towards others in the area to meet your needs.

Open to all, regardless of when bereavement occurred.

You can reach us at compassionatecw@uhcw.nhs.uk

[The Good Grief Trust](#) - Helping those affected by grief in the UK.

<https://www.thegoodgrieftrust.org/>

Support Organisations for Survivors of Domestic Abuse:

[Coventry Haven](#) – offer free, friendly and confidential advice and support around domestic abuse. Open Access Sessions are held at various venues around the city, on a daily basis, Monday – Friday. Call 08001114998 or 02476444077 for details of where and when sessions are being held.

<https://coventryhaven.co.uk>

[Safe to Talk](#) – Coventry City Council supported helpline offering free support to those experiencing, or have experienced, domestic abuse.

Safe To Talk Helpline: 0800 111 4998

[Refuge](#) – Provides support, accommodation, advocacy and campaigning for women and children affected by domestic abuse.

<https://refuge.org.uk>

Free Helpline: 0808 2000 247

Support Organisations for Families Impacted by a State-Related Death:

[Families Outside](#) – Offering help and information following a death in custody.

<https://www.familiesoutside.co.uk/families/help-and-information-following-a-death-in-custody/>

Mental Health Support Organisations:

[Mind](#) – A mental health charity making sure no one has to face a mental health problem alone. Offering free information and mental health support.

<https://www.mind.org.uk>

Telephone: 0300 123 3393

Other Resources/Opportunities for Creative Engagement

This production has been supported by the local NHS Compassionate Communities team from University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire. The team has assisted with the development of creative reflection and engagement tools, giving audiences a way to check in with their emotional wellbeing following the production.

These creative responses, located by the main entrance of the theatre, are designed to be simple, yet meaningful. We hope that they'll bring you a sense of togetherness and care as you participate.

- **The Waves:** we invite you to contribute to a cumulative installation throughout the run of the show. The Waves is an opportunity to reflect on how the play connected with you, and process any feelings that have arisen through engaging with the story.
- **Pick A Poem:** inspired by Swim, Aunty, Swim! and selected using themes of Hope, Comfort and Just Being. Choose an envelope containing poems to take home with you.
- **Matchbox Memories:** decorate your own matchbox, and place an object, memory, or message inside. Fill it with something that matters to you; a person never forgotten, an intention to be upheld.

A digital copy of this pack is available to access using the QR code below.



With Thanks

Thanks to Charlotte Temple from the Compassionate Communities project for her support in the design and development of audience engagement activities connected to the show.