

Fact sheet for Sunjata Kamalenya McCarter Theatre Center, 2012

- David Conrad, one of the world's leading authorities on the Sunjata epic, as well as the people of Manden serves as the Historical Consultant for our production. His vast knowledge of the culture and evolution of the greatest hero of West Africa makes him an invaluable member of our creative team.
- Balla Kouyaté, who served as the composer and tours with our production, is a direct descendent of Balla Fasseké Kouyaté, who was Sunjata Keita's personal djeli, his praise singer. Balla Fasseké Kouyaté is not only credited with having written many of the traditional songs that survive and are sung every day about Sunjata, but he also is known for being the first person to play the balafon, a wooden xylophone that is now a staple instrument in West African musical performance. The first actual balafon he played is known as the Sosso-Bala, and still exists today as one of the 19 Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage as recognized by the United Nations. Balla Kouyaté's father is known as the Sosso Balatigui, or guardian of this ancient instrument. We are honored to have Balla Kouyaté as a member of our company, as he plays the balafon in our production and celebrates in song the heritage of his people and extremely prestigious family.
- Mary Jo Arnoldi, Curator of African Ethnology and Arts and Chair of the Department of Anthropology at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History served as a consultant for the creation of our masks and puppets, which were inspired by the Sogo Bo puppets of the Mali region.
- The play Sunjata Kamalenya features many songs that have been passed through oral historians in the Mandé region for the past 800 years. Throughout the course of the play audience members are taught some of the songs and are invited to sing or dance along with the performers. There are also dozen of Bambara language phrases and words interspersed into the play, many of which are translated and audience members are invited to say aloud with the cast, including "namu" which is a word of affirmation akin to amen or "I agree." When a djeli tells the story of Sunjata in Mali or Guinea or the surrounding areas, there is also a "namu-sayer," who serves as a supporter for the djeli declaring "namu" in varying tones according to his emotional response to the story being told.
- The title Sunjata Kamalenya is a nod to the people of West Africa who speak Bambara. As more westerners become aware of the Sunjata epic a cottage industry of producers have begun monopolizing on the opportunity to create theatrical productions that make use of the story without doing extensive research on who the culture of the people of Manden, their belief systems, and their oral tradition. The word "kamalenya" means "for children," essentially translating the title to mean "Sunjata for Children." If you are from Mali or Guinea and you see our title it is our way of telling you, "this is not just any Sunjata."
- The scenery and props for Sunjata Kamalenya were created by McCarter Theater's nationally renowned carpenters and scenic artists. The costumes were purchased from West African vendors in Harlem, New York. All of the costumes were handcrafted in Mali or Guinea.
- The story of Sunjata has been passed on through the oral tradition of the djeli (griot or historic storyteller) for the past eight centuries. It has never been written down by any African historian and until 1960 had never been put down on paper by anyone. The only somewhat contemporary written account of Sunjata comes from Arabian Scholars who visited the Mali Empire in the 14th century and interacted with some of Sunjata's ancestors. In the last fifty years various westerners have been privileged to audio record the epic being recited in Homeric fashion over the course of several days. These ethnologists have then transcribed and translated the recording into various languages including English and as such there are about a dozen Sunjata translations that exist in print today. The version of the Sunjata epic that served as the basis for our production is that of djeli Tassej Condé, a descendent of Sunjata's mother Sogolon Condé. This performance was transcribed and

edited by David Conrad, who serves as Historical Consultant for this production. What makes this version so appealing to McCarter is that it beautifully highlights the importance of familial relationships in the Mandé culture and the power of female influence in a physically male-centric society. The first half of the play follows the struggles of Sunjata's mother and the adversity she had to endure just to bring him into this world and protect him as a small child. It was important to us to create play with strong female characters, and Tassef Condé's version really highlights many important influential women in the world their world.

- Dyane Harvey, renowned dancer and choreographer/co-founder of Forces of Nature Dance Theater Company whose mission includes "the empowerment of people of color," is the choreographer for Sunjata Kamalenya. Dyane's choreography is founded upon traditional West African dance and blends authenticity with a very kid-friendly approach that gets the audience up and dancing very quickly.
- This play was first presented as a rehearsed reading in May 2010, at the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, as part of New Visions/New Voices.
- This play was developed as a staged-workshop performance at the McCarter Theatre Center, as part of the 2010 McCarter Lab.