

A Family Manual for Kwanzaa

By
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FAMILY CHARACTERS

(ranked in order of privilege)

1. Larry - father, 40s-50s
2. Francis - mother, 40s-50s
3. Bennett - son, 20s
4. Liza - daughter, teenager
5. Mema - grandmother, 80s

TV CHARACTERS

1. Wiggedy Whack - white rap duo: WW
2. Althea- talk show empress/TV chef/pet therapist
3. Rap Video Hoes /Showgirls - seductive mistresses of champagne and car rims.
4. Jenna - talk show audience member.
5. Announcer - voice that can be embodied on stage or pre-recorded.

All the roles should be played by an ensemble of 8-10 actors. The family is comprised of 5 African American actors. Mema and Althea should be played by the same African American actress. The roles of Wiggedy Whack and Announcer are played by the same 2 actors: White males who can be in the age range of 20-40s. The roles of Video Hoes, Showgirls, and Jenna should be played by 2 women: one is white and one who is non-Black. Both of the actresses are in the age range of 20-40s.

If you are looking for a cast of 8, then Wiggedy Whack and Video Hoes can be played by two white actors (one male and one female) who will share all four roles.

The characters ages and who can play them are flexible. Ideally the son and daughter should be in their early to late 20s. The mother and father should feel like they're in their 40s to late 50s. The grandparents should feel like they're in the 60s-80s, however they should probably be played by actors who are in the 30s-50s, because there is a lot of role-doubling.

STORY

This is a comedy that takes place around Kwanzaa. But it could just as easily be Passover, Christmas, Ramadan, or All Saints Day. The holiday is just the setting for the wishes, hopes, and dreams of a family to play out.

The tone of this story is 'unusual happiness.' In this setting, smiles and laughter come out of a sense of embarrassment and discomfort.

SETTING

The story is set in one of those prefab containers known as suburban house. It's a box that's stapled and glued together, and then dropped into the middle of the swamps of South Florida. The play centers around a Kwanzaa table replete with the various pieces necessary for a holiday: a Mkeka (straw mat), Muhindi (ears of corn), Zawadi (small gifts), Kikombe Cha Umoja (unity cup), Tambiko (water and soil sample). At the center of the table is the Kinara (candle holder) with the Mishuma Saba (seven candles). In the back hangs a Bendera Ya Taifa (Flag of the Black Nation).

DAY 1: Umoja

The Telle family set up the room for Kwanzaa. Larry, Francis, Liza, and Bennett place props around the space.

FRANCIS

Come on, let's hurry. Your grandparents are going to be here any minute. Be careful with the Mshumaa.

BENNETT

The what?

FRANCIS

The first candle.

BENNETT

Why didn't you just say don't break the candle?

FRANCIS

I want you guys to get comfortable with the terminology. Use the word bank I emailed everyone.

LIZA

The word bank is ridiculous.

LARRY

Let's not gang up on your mother. She's trying.

FRANCIS

Umoja.

BEAT

FRANCIS

That's the greeting for the day.

LARRY

Right, right.

FRANCIS

And you're supposed to say back to me...

LARRY

Umoja.

FRANCIS

No. 'Habari Gani.'

BENNETT

So each day we have to say a different word of some sort and then say something else in response to it?

FRANCIS

Each day we celebrate a concept.

LIZA

You mean a concept like communism?

FRANCIS

No, like an ideal. Happiness, love, unity.

BENNETT

Ugh. This is like a Black cult. I can't wait to move out of here.

FRANCIS

Anyway, in response to the idea for the day we always say 'habari gani,' which is like saying 'ditto' or 'I heard that.'

BENNETT

Why don't we just say 'I heard that' and simplify this?

FRANCIS

I'm going to ignore that because 'Umoja' means unity. This is the first day. This holiday is supposed to unite and bring us together to-

BENNETT grabs the remote control from Liza and turns on the TV. TV is located out toward the audience. The sound of cable news can be heard.

LIZA

Hey!

LARRY

Bennett.

BENNETT

Umoja.

LARRY

Bennett, turn the TV off.

BENNETT

You're supposed to say Haberry Ganja.

FRANCIS

It's Habari Gani.

BENNETT

Exactly.

FRANCIS

Habari Gani and turn that thing off. Your grandparents are coming soon and we want to show them unity. Hey, first one to show some Umoja wins Kwanzaa for the day.

LIZA

If we win Kwanzaa, does that mean we no longer have to do it? Like an immunity clause on a reality TV show.

FRANCIS

No.

BENNETT

But I like that idea.

FRANCIS

You win Kwanzaa and you get to...tell us about what that day means to you.

BENNETT

(turns off TV)

What this day means to me is unity around the TV.

FRANCIS

Bennett.

BENNETT

Wait, wait. Hear me out. We set up all the Kwanzaa stuff in front of the TV. Kwanzaa candles, Kwanzaa quilts, Kwanzaa cake, cookies, crayons. Now we bring the past of all these fake Nativity props and the mud/dirt thing-

FRANCIS

-that's the Tambiko and it's the water and soil sample-

BENNETT

-that's just lovely. So we take Tambiko and all this stuff from the past and we set it in front of our TV. Black culture, Black life, Blackness. And we have like a multimedia display of Kwanzaa in the past (pointing to props), the present in us and the future (point out toward TV). And then our Kwanzaa becomes like this... fully-enmeshed, living, organic, holistic thingy.

LARRY

...that was actually a pretty convincing argument.

FRANCIS

Larry!

LARRY

Sorry, uh, Umoja.

FRANCIS

Habari Gani and really? 'Holistic thingy' is winning you over?

LIZA

I mean, if we're going to watch TV anyway. Why not just use the holiday to watch...black TV?

BENNETT

Bingo. See, we're uniting on this. Black TV: music videos...

LIZA

...Bad infomercials on hair straighteners and skin lighteners...

LARRY

A couple of Blaxploitation films. And we could watch some of those talk shows with women sitting around with giant coffee mugs and yelling at each other.

FRANCIS

I'm feeling a bit betrayed.

LARRY

Oh come on, honey. Everything is gonna be just fine. You know Papa gonna work it out for you.

LIZA

Gross Dad. Just gross.

FRANCIS

I'm gonna check on dinner. And while I'm gone I want you guys to really think about our ancestors and all they did. Really think about the suffering they endured so that we could have this freedom. You sit with that and then you decide if you want to squander it on watching TV or being together for a few precious days. Think about our ancestors. All I'm asking for is seven days of cooperation, seven days of acting like a family. Would it kill you jackasses to be together for one week? Think about the goddamn ancestors!!!

Francis exits. There's a long solemn moment. Then Liza grabs the remote and turns on the TV.

LARRY

Liza.

LIZA

What?

LARRY

We're supposed to be feeling guilty.

LIZA

I had a moment. I thought about the ancestors. It's terrible.

BENNETT

And I think they would want us to watch TV.

LIZA

I do too. Umoja.

BENNETT

Hagani Berry. Once again, we are united. (fake African accent) Father. Giver of Life. Tree Bearing Fruit. Join the tribal circle.

Larry sits down as Liza flips through the channels. They land on a music video.

BENNETT

STOP!

Thumping bass music starts. VIDEO

HOES bop around with dead soulless eyes. One holds champagne while the other has some car rims in her hand. RAP DUO, WIGGEDY WHACK are jamming.

BENNETT

Awww, Wiggedy Whack in the house. This is the jam right here.

WIGGEDY

Girl, you know I think I want to make you my wife

WHACK

-Yay-

WIGGEDY

We can be together, you and me for life

WHACK

-Fo' sho-

WIGGEDY

But if you want to chill, run games and ride

WHACK

-Nut what-

WIGGEDY

Then you best believe you're gonna open wide.

WHACK

After the show, it's a little bit of Cris

WIGGEDY

-Sip, Sip-

WHACK

While we get pissy drunk and you reminisce

WIGGEDY

-zip, zip-

WHACK

Don't act surprise, you know your way around

WIGGEDY

-beeyatch-

WHACK

Now it's time for you take that trip downtown/ So...

WIGGEDY WHACK

Put my dick in your mouth
Put my dick in your mouth
Make a nigga happy, put my dick in your mouth

WIGGEDY

Can't say nuttin'
With my dick in your mouth.

WHACK

Swallow all my babies
When my dick in yo' mouth
I'll buy a house
If ya open your blouse
Give a protein boost
When you chug-

BENNETT

Swallow all my babies
When my dick in yo' mouth
I'll buy ya a house
If ya open your blouse
Give a protein boost
When you chug my juice...

Larry changes the
channel.

BENNETT

HEY!

LARRY

What is wrong with your generation?

BENNETT

Dad, that was a classic.

LARRY

Pop music putrescence, that's all that is.

LIZA

It's cultural appropriation and degrading to women.

BENNETT

It's not degrading to women. It's degrading to everybody.
Therefore it actually could be considered feminist music.
It levels the playing field.

LIZA

Oh, please. You know, for someone who claims to like women so much, you sure do love talking about hitting 'em, smacking 'em, flipping 'em.

LARRY

Maybe that's why you don't have a girlfriend.

BENNETT

Can we stop talking about this? I mean I thought we had a very lovely song playing to get us in the Kwanzaa spirit, but apparently I was wrong.

LARRY

Yes, you were. Umoja.

LIZA

Habari Gani.

BENNETT

And let the record show that I've seen you dancing to my music.

LIZA

...only in irony.

BENNETT

You can't shake your ass in irony. Umoja!

Francis enters with more candles.

LARRY

New rule: they'll be no more foul music in the house during Kwanzaa.

FRANCIS

That's the spirit, honey. And I printed out the Kwanzaa word bank for everyone.

Francis hands out a sheet of paper to everyone.

LARRY

Poppa's just laying down the law.

LIZA

Gross Dad.

FRANCIS

Then can Poppa explain to me why the TV is still on?

LARRY

I was just showing them the filth they are consuming. The stuff we have to turn away from as African Americans.

FRANCIS

Oh. Well I suppose that's okay. Now, we gotta problem: I just got off the phone with Mema.

LARRY

And? What's taking them so long?

FRANCIS

Opa is lost.

LARRY

Again?

FRANCIS

Honey, he's in the opening stages of dementia. So we're dealing with an ornery, angry, and lost man. And you know what they need to guide them home. My lil' Poppa Smurf Navigator.

LARRY

Can I just talk them in?

FRANCIS

Larry.

LARRY

They're at the same spot?

FRANCIS

At Denny's sipping coffee, and waiting for you to arrive.

LARRY

Fine. I'll go fetch the folks.

FRANCIS

Umoja, Larry.

LARRY

Yeah whatever.

Larry exits. Awkward silence.

FRANCIS

I'm guessing you guys have had a chance to think about the errors of your ways and reflect on our forefathers.

BENNETT

Sure, yeah yeah.

LIZA

Absolutely. Umoja!

Francis picks up the remote control.

FRANCIS

Look, I don't hate TV. It's just that for this one, slender moment in our life I want to focus on us and

FRANCIS (cont'd)

just being more of a family. Would you guys just stop!

As Francis is saying this, she hits the 'pause' button the remote. Suddenly Liza and Bennett freeze in mid-speech and gesture. They are in suspended animation.

FRANCIS

(turning around)

Now if we can just stop, and breathe, then I think we have...(looks at them) All right, quit playing around. Liza? Bennett?

Francis walks around them and pokes at their bodies. Then she looks at the remote control. She hits a button. And they unfreeze and continue moaning.

LIZA

We get it, Mom.

BENNETT

The ancestors, yeah yeah.

FRANCIS

I think I'm losing my mind.

BENNETT

We know: you're crazy for Kwanzaa.

FRANCIS

No, it's just...never mind. Why don't you watch some TV?
Maybe that will make everything all right.

BENNETT

You're gonna to allow us TV time?

FRANCIS

Sure. As a family bonding activity until Opa and Mema arrive. How about I just change the channel to something more... therapeutic.

Francis points the remote control at them and presses a button. Then she keeps pressing it but nothing happens.

LIZA

Uh...Mom? We are not the TV.

BENNETT

The TV is that way.

FRANCIS

Right. I was just...checking the remote. (presses) Here we go.

Talk show music plays. Liza and BENNETT groan.

BENNETT

Ugh. Not the Althea show.

FRANCIS

She's one of the few uplifting things on the air. And your mom watches her all the time.

LIZA

She makes me very uncomfortable.

FRANCIS

What's the matter with you guys? "Essence" named her one of the most eligible black female billionaires over the age of 40.

ANNOUNCER

It's the Althea Alice show. Now please give a hot, spicy, deep-fried, sista gurl hand for Althea.

Studio applause. Althea, a busty and sassy black woman enters with a microphone. She's like a Wendy Williams-style talk show host. She pumps the crowd up with high fives and dancing with audience members.

ALTHEA

And we are back at the Althea Show and you know what we say: 'hey, sista-gurl!' We're here wrapping up, 'Ebony and Ivory Spiritual Awareness Week' on the Althea Show. We are going to take some questions from the audience. So if any of y'all have any questions for Althea just raise your precious hands.

JENNA, a preppy woman, bounces up from her seat and toward Althea.

JENNA

Ohmygod, I can't believe I'm here. 'Hey sista' gurl.'

ALTHEA

Hey sista gurl!

JENNA

Sista' gurl Althea, you are a true inspiration in my life. (APPLAUSE) I remember my mom telling me about her childhood in the south. And how she had this sassy black maid named Brenda, or Beulah or something. Well Beulah was always there for her. She was even breastfed by this wise, spiritual maid. And I realized that I never had a Beulah growing up. And it just made me so sad.

ALTHEA

That's terrible, honeychild.

JENNA

Sista' I got so depressed as a child that I would go into the kitchen and take out the Aunt Jemima syrup bottles and

JENNA (cont'd)

re-enact the maid quarters on one of those plantations. And I would be the matriarch and I would sit around with all my little Jemimas gossiping and giggling, you know, just like on a real plantation. We would laugh and talk about boys I liked. They would do my hair and scrub the floors while singing Motown songs. Every once in a while Uncle Ben would pop in and copulate with one of the Jemimas in front of us. We would all just sit around, watching and giggling as Ben moaned and wheezed, because of his emphysema. We would giggle and point as Ben worked himself into a frenzy. Before -you know- his climax, Ben would try to pull out in time so there wouldn't be any more Jemimas and Bens, because he was sick of bringing babies into the world and watching them get sold off by the master. It was so cute.

ALTHEA

Sounds like you have a fruitful imagination.

JENNA

My therapist says it's schizophrenia. But back to the plantation: one day Uncle Ben got drunk off sake and flew into an alcoholic rage. He raped all the Aunt Jemimas and broke their necks, before he off'ed himself with a shotgun. It was the saddest day of my life. And as I sat there crying in a brown pool of their severed heads, blood and love spunk, I saw your show come on the TV. My whole life changed. Althea, I just want to say that you are like those maids to me. The way you laugh and shuffle gives me goose bumps. It's so exactly like I imagined it. You sitting there like a rotund voodoo goddess, comforting all the plantation wives who-

ALTHEA

-Plantation?

JENNA

Sorry, I mean housewives. I don't know if I speak for everyone when I say this, but: I suck at the teet of your mysterious, but down-home sista' gurl wisdom.

Jenna weeps. Althea goes over to comfort her, strokes her hair and Jenna clings to her. She sits down and puts Jenna in her lap. Althea thinks for a moment and then knows what she has to do. As if she's

used to it by now, Althea yanks down her blouse and slides one cup off her breast. She puts Jenna's head to her nipple, letting her partake of her nourishment. As Althea nurses Jenna, she hums a negro spiritual, first softly and then with growing passion.

ALTHEA

Mmmhmmm...mm-mm-mmm,
Hmmm-mm-mm-mmmmm!
This little light of mine,
I'm gonna let it shine,
Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine
mmm...hmmm...(upbeat tempo)
mmm-hmm...hmm...hmm
(skatting)skittle-be-bop-a-dip-do-whop-pam-bo-zip-pety-zam-
bam-bo! (cringes)Oh! (She adjusts herself) Careful with dem
teef, gurl.'

LIZA

Turn it!

FRANCIS

I can't.

BENNETT

TURN IT!

FRANCIS

The button is stuck!

ALTHEA

Who else wants to be nourished?

APPLAUSE. Althea begins undoing her other cup. FRANCIS manages to turn the TV off. They stand there, panting for a few moments. They all sit. Francis places the remote control down. She attempt to speak a few times and then gives up. Larry re-enters.

LARRY

Well they are here. All in one piece. I tried to show the

LARRY (cont'd)

old man, once again, what exit to take. But he wouldn't hear of it, so he just followed me. Mema is in the bathroom. Oh, we just have one little problem: Opa has locked himself in the car and refuses to come out. But he's gotta poop some time so we should be fine.

Larry looks at his family who appears to be in shock.

LARRY

Is everything all right?

FRANCIS

Honey, the TV is broken.

LARRY

But it was working fine a few minutes ago. What's wrong with it?

FRANCIS

The remote.

LARRY

Oh, it probably just needs a new battery. I can fix it.

BENNETT

Maybe it's better if you didn't.

LIZA

We can just let it be.

LARRY

Do my ears deceive me or are you guys ready to turn off the tube and come together for some family bonding?

FRANCIS

(shaken up)
Ben and Liza, why don't go wash up and set the table for dinner? Your father and I will go lure Opa out of the car and get anything they need from trunk. And then let's reconvene here in five minutes to light the, uh, thingy.

BENNETT

The Mshumaa.

FRANCIS

What? Oh, right. That. Yes, we will light the Mshumaa and the first day of Kwanzaa will commence. (under breath) God help us.

LARRY

What?

FRANCIS

I said God bless us. Each and every one. Now go.

Bennett and Liza exit.

LARRY

So who's going to be the hostage negotiator this time?

FRANCIS

Well you wrangled them here. It's only fair that I talk Opa out of the car before he makes a mess of the upholstery.

LARRY

Then I'll go see about Mema.

Francis and Larry exits.
Mema, a snow-haired Black woman, shuffles in on a walker. She looks around, sees no one and keeps shuffling. She grabs the remote and turns on the TV. The lights flicker and Mema gets scared that she did something wrong. She exits. Francis re=enters looking for Mema. An announcer's voice booms from heavens.

ANNOUNCER

Cracked wide open. Can you feel it? Ancestral electricity. Coursing molecules, floating in the air like little pixels. A swirling vortex of dots churned out by a pulsing red device. Pumping out millions of specks joining together, forming a sea of images. Cresting waves and whirlpools. Sealed inside a portal. And when that looking glass cracks. SMASH! HA! Wide open! Wide open.